



# Liza Bennet: Vampire Hunter

- Vampire Hunters Book One -

BY  
AFTON LEIGH ROSE

LIZA BENNET

*VAMPIRE HUNTER*

AFTON LEIGH ROSE

**GLD Press**



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# CHAPTER ONE – LIZA

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a dickbag with too much money must be in want of a new hobby. Liza Bennet hated ultra-rich playboys with too much time on their hands and she hated them even more when they tried to elbow their way into the vampire hunting business. Vampire hunting was a lot like the restaurant business: a lot of money to be made, but most new companies failed within a year. Two at most. Dude-bros with a buttload of venture capital money came in, made a lot of noise, killed a vampire or two over the course of a year, and then either got themselves killed or gave up and tried launching a new dating app (“you swipe UP on this one!”).

So Liza wasn’t particularly surprised to see yet another clad-in-black douchebag with too many gadgets show himself at the end of the smelly, spider-infested alley she had been staking out for over an hour.

“Ugh,” she groaned softly, rolling her eyes. She straightened, leaning against the stucco wall of the strip mall beside her, and considered her options. Now that this spot was dead – no vampire in the world would miss this guy and stumble into her ambush now – she’d have to rethink her strategy.

She’d been tracking this particular vampire – case number 465, a solitary vampire with no hive protection but also no discernible hunting pattern – for the last three straight weeks. Well. Jane had done the tracking, really. That was the deal: Jane was the brains, Liza was the brawn, the one who didn’t mind getting her hands dirty.

Case #465 preferred to feed on older women who had no other family around, no one to miss them. A vamp with a conscience. Not the first they’d ever encountered, but even

when one had a sudden attack of conscience, it couldn't make up for the decades-long or even centuries-long string of murders they all committed. And even older women with no family around still deserved to live, as Catherine continually told Liza and Jane, every time she acted as bait for them.

But now case #465 was going to see this dude-bro coming from a mile away, with his glowing gadgetry, heavy crossbow, and obvious tactical gear clothing, and #465 wouldn't come anywhere near the bait Jane had set up. Catherine was going to be pissed. She hated being out in the cold, charged double for it, and insisted on collecting her fees even if the vamp didn't show up. This was going to eat into their budget, for sure.

"Liza," her earpiece hissed. "What should we do?"

Jane had finally spotted the dude-bro through whatever security camera she had hacked into. She was back at her apartment, where the Wi-Fi was reliable and there wasn't a monster lurking nearby.

"We stand down," Liza sighed back. She watched the dude-bro continue backing into her alley, as if walking backward would fool a vampire into not seeing him. He'd step on her in another twelve steps. "We'll get 465 another night."

The huff that came over the earpiece bounced against Liza's eardrum, making her flinch.

"Fine," Jane said. "I'll call off Catherine. This is going to be expensive."

"I know," Liza said, shaking her head. If only their financing could level out, be more consistent. How did those dude-bros get such consistent money pouring in all the time? She pushed away from the wall and stashed her stakes in the specialty pockets within her leather jacket. The gear was an annoyance in the summers, being in Los Angeles and all, but in mid-November, she welcomed the coverage. A necessary evil, anyway. A sundress was a

terrible way to hide weaponry, not to mention all the exposed skin was a problem when dealing with bitey vampires.

The stranger at the end of the alleyway crept into the darkness, boots moving silently over the pavement.

Well. He was competent, she would give him that much.

Then again, he was still backing up and didn't yet realize she was behind him, so maybe he wasn't *super*-competent.

Silently, she pulled a blade – a regular one made for humans, not one for supernatural creatures – from the side of her boot and waited.

She didn't need to approach him; he would keep backing up until—

"Hey buddy," she said in a low voice. He had nearly stepped on her, and would have jumped out of his skin if she hadn't put her arms around him, her blade at his throat.

"I don't have any money," he said. His voice didn't shake, surprisingly. He smelled of sandalwood oils; probably used in his beard. The vamp would have smelled him coming anyway, even if he hadn't been as obvious as a hooker on a street corner.

"I'm not interested in your money," she said. She felt his muscular shoulders relax beneath her grip. She could practically hear his eyebrows quirk upward in surprise when he realized she was a woman. "I need you to stay off this beat."

"Beat?"

"The vamp. He's mine."

Her captive chuckled slightly, relaxing even further in her arms. She tensed up, letting him know that she wasn't a meek little kitten to be dismissed too easily. "That remains to be seen."

Liza sucked in a sharp breath, adjusted her grip, reminding him that she held a blade to his throat. Her

business was her life, and she took a threat against it as a threat against her.

"Hey, hey, hey," he said, his voice growing slightly louder. A car rolled by, the stereo thumping out an unrecognizable bass line as it went. "No need for any of that."

She relaxed the knife at his throat but not her grip around his body. "I'm not negotiating with you," she said. "I need this case, and you're never going to get anywhere near him with all that crap on."

"Crap?"

"All this tech, all this gear," she said. She pushed him away from her body, suddenly all too aware of the contact between them.

He turned to face her, crossbow drawn, but held loosely. "I hunt my way, you hunt yours."

"My way has been chipping away at the vampire population for nearly a decade."

"Chipping away is right." His face was in shadow, this deep into the alley, but he held himself like an athlete, shoulders back and feet set apart. Sturdy. Immovable.

Liza wrinkled her nose but the dudebro kept going. "If your way was better," he said, unbolting his crossbow and putting it all away, "The vampire population would be non-existent. A decade is an awful long time to be fighting the same fight."

Liza took an instinctive step towards him, her blade up again.

"Whoa," he said, putting his hands up. "I take it back."

"Good." She held her position but didn't back up.

He muttered something Liza couldn't hear. She narrowed her eyes, watching him strap something to his belt.

"I'll get out of your way," he said, but Liza could hear the sarcasm dripping from his voice. She relaxed her stance,

letting him go. He gave her a two-finger salute and disappeared into the night.

"What's going on?" Jane's whisper came through the coms.

"Nothing," Liza said, fuming. "I'm coming back in."

"What about the vamp?"

"No way he's still here with all this racket. We'll have to try again tomorrow."

"It took me weeks to track him down."

"I know," Liza sighed. "And I'm sorry. But we're gonna have to be watching for this guy now, too, apparently."

Liza turned in the opposite direction that the man had gone and headed back home. Her car was parked a block away, under one of the few streetlights in this neighborhood. The night was noisy, but not in any specific way. Stray dogs, cars on adjacent streets, the hum of neon signs over ramshackle businesses. All of it blended together to create a backdrop for Liza's angry thoughts as she stomped back to her little black Kia.

She ran through her calendar mentally, planning when she and Jane would both be available for another attempt on 465. 465 was an older vamp, more experienced, so he fed every few days as the thirst struck, not in a nightly frenzy like a younger vamp would do. Jane would have to track him – again – and hope Catherine was willing to play bait. Again. Hopefully he wouldn't feed tonight and they'd get a crack at him soon.

But tomorrow night wouldn't work; it was the stupid mayor's dinner. Liza ground her teeth together. The mayor's dinner was one of the best chances for Jane and Liza to secure future funding; they couldn't afford to skip it, but Liza really didn't want to go with such a recent failure on the books.

That dudebro better hope he didn't cross Liza's path again. He had cost her a big opportunity tonight.



## CHAPTER TWO – DARCY

Darcy was back at headquarters before he realized he hadn't even asked the woman what her name was. What a nuisance. He'd been clearing vampires out of city centers for almost two decades and not once in all that time had anyone challenged him on his ability to do his job. He knew there had to be a team of Hunters already in Los Angeles; the place was too damn big for one team to do alone, and clearly someone *had* been chipping away at the vamp population. But the mayor wouldn't have hired Darcy's team if the vamps weren't becoming a serious problem. Obviously this woman's old-school method of ambushes and wooden stakes wasn't getting the job done.

One more obstacle to him collecting a paycheck. One more big paycheck away from being able to wipe the blood from his hands permanently and actually settle down. Buy a house with a yard that he'd have time to relax in, not just apartments and condos and doormen and impersonal spaces.

Peace and quiet.

He could only dream. A siren wailed past the loft space that served as both headquarters for the Hunting team and his home. Well, technically 'home' was the double-unit space he shared with Brett upstairs, still undecorated, and headquarters was this big, open industrial-style loft full of Hunting gear and tracking gadgets and workout equipment, but considering how little time he spent upstairs, this space felt a lot like home, too. He'd only been here a few weeks, getting settled and getting his team up and running again, but 'headquarters' felt the same no matter where they went, and 'home' always felt a little foreign, a little un-broken-in.

Brett was waiting for him when he arrived, whiskey at the ready.

"Sorry 'bout the fail, man," Brett said as Darcy started stripping off gear.

"Yeah, well, I'll go back out again tomorrow night."

"No, you won't."

Darcy sighed and waited. Brett just stared at him, eyebrows raised behind his black-rimmed glasses, a deliberately patient smile on his face. He was waiting for Darcy to remember something, but Darcy couldn't for the life of him—

"Oh, for fuck's sake," he finally huffed, running a hand over his face. "The mayor's dinner is tomorrow night."

"Yep," Brett's lips popped on the last letter. He turned back to the computer screen, downing his drink in one go. They drank whiskey on Hunt nights, even when the Hunt went badly. Especially if the Hunt went badly.

"Why do they *all* do this?" Darcy's effort to disarm himself and strip off the chaffing leathers became instantly more about slamming things onto steel tabletops. The clanging was oddly satisfying. "Why do they insist on these big parties, these ostentatious displays? They can't ever just hand over a contract and a check and let us do our jobs. They've got to trot us out like prized mares, rattle off *our* statistics as if they're responsible for the work that *we* do."

"I know," Brett said calmly, shaking his head slightly. They had tread this ground before and Brett knew better than to contradict Darcy.

"It's a waste of time. And money. The cash they drop on the catering and the security—"

"And the DJ," Brett piped in, falsely cheerful.

"A DJ?" Darcy groaned. He downed his whiskey and slammed that glass down, too. "I knew Los Angeles was going to be the death of me."

"People like to dance while they waste time and money. It's kind of the point of the thing, actually now that I

think about it.”

“Waste of time,” Darcy grumbled again.

“It’s good publicity.”

“We can buy publicity.”

“And that would be yet another waste of money.”

“Don’t try to turn this around on me,” Darcy said, jabbing a finger in Brett’s chest. Brett poured him another measure of whiskey, now that he was fully disarmed and wearing just his jeans and a black t-shirt. “I’m not the one throwing a party and pretending it’s a socially responsible way to award contracts or report on crime statistics.”

“I’m not turning it around on you,” Brett said. “I’m just reminding you that this business venture of ours is so profitable *because* we take advantage of free publicity. And political connections. Who knows. Maybe if we clean up here fast enough, we can get that Manhattan contract you’ve always wanted.”

“*You’ve* always wanted,” Darcy said. He drained his tumbler again and pushed it away from him, letting it slide across the stainless steel surface to rest near Brett’s dishes from the evening. “I want to retire.”

“You’re thirty-eight.”

“And I feel sixty,” Darcy said, rotating his shoulders and stretching his neck. “You’re not the one out there, being slammed into walls or having knives pressed to your throat. It gets tiring, to say the least.”

“Yeah, what happened out there tonight?”

Darcy sighed and relayed the story quickly: getting into position, the woman who had ambushed him, his quick recovery, her threats, and his forfeiture of the kill.

Brett stared at him, lips pressed into a thin line.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what? Like you blew the first kill on our shiny new contract? Like you put the entire company in jeopardy because a girl caught you by surprise?”

“She wasn’t a *girl*,” Darcy countered hotly.

“She wasn’t a *vampire*, either,” Brett snapped. “This only works if we’re both doing our jobs. I track and do reconnaissance and you take the kill. It’ll take me weeks to track this vampire back down—”

“I know, and I’m sorry.”

Brett looked like he wanted to say more, but they had agreed a long time ago that this partnership didn’t work if they kept fighting with each other. He slapped a pen against his open palm repeatedly, his lips pursed, his eyes not meeting Darcy’s.

“I’m going to bed,” Darcy said wearily.

Brett nodded. “Be ready to leave at seven tomorrow night.”

Darcy grunted his acknowledgement and mentally reminded himself to get his tux unpacked and to the cleaners to be steamed tomorrow.

## CHAPTER THREE – LIZA

Liza sat in the passenger seat of Jane's Camaro, checking her lipstick in the visor mirror. Jane was driving too fast and lecturing Liza about not alienating potential donors, a lecture Liza had just about memorized at this point.

"This isn't fair," Liza griped, closing the visor a little harder than was necessary. "I haven't thrown a drink on anyone in forever—"

"Four months," Jane corrected her. She turned right into the parking garage for the venue, tires squealing briefly on the extra-smooth concrete. "You haven't thrown a drink on anyone in four months, and that was the husband of one of our biggest donors. She pulled her donation after that."

"He grabbed my ass, what was I supposed to do?"

Jane grunted. "You should have kicked him in the balls, but you shouldn't have gotten caught doing it."

"I'll try to be more clandestine next time."

"You're capable of sneaking up on a 400-year-old vampire. I think you can handle being a little more discreet with your black-tie vengeance."

Liza checked her cleavage. "Yeah, well, I just kinda hope somebody single and closer to my age grabs my ass tonight."

"I hope that for you, too, honey, you know that."

Jane parked the car and they both got out. A few other guests were headed for the elevators, too, evident in their formal gowns and tuxedos. Liza was always forcibly reminded of prom whenever she had to attend one of these functions: fancy enough to require shaved legs in high heels and a plunging neckline on a sparkly dress, but not so fancy that everyone invited could afford the valet.

Liza marveled at Jane making small talk with the other party guests in the elevator and on the way to the ballroom. These events were almost always the same rotating cast of characters: the members of the city council shifted occasionally, but the mayor and other elected officials tended to stay in office for a long time around here. The same wealthy donors circulated, sometimes with a spouse on their arm, sometimes “free” for the evening or the weekend (thus the ass-grabbing that had resulted in a thrown drink four months earlier). They donated to candidates and causes, and since the city budget was constantly being constrained, Liza’s small business was always looking for donations to bridge the gap. Public safety wasn’t the sexiest of issues for donors – they tended to prefer donating to causes that were primarily “for the children” or supported the arts – but it was important work and she needed to be able to pay rent. Tonight, she and Jane were hoping to be named the recipients of one of the grants the mayor had been promising to help improve public safety, particularly in the city parks.

The ballroom was the same as always: a dance floor in the center, large round tables surrounding it, black-vested servers circulating with hors d'oeuvres, a cash bar operating at the east end of the room. Somewhere inconspicuous, a DJ was playing some Frank Sinatra tunes to ease everyone into the event.

The mayor wasn’t here yet, but several members of the city council were already circulating. Jane smiled and waved, her enthusiasm contagious. Liza steered clear of the hors d'oeuvres; she was deathly allergic to shellfish and you just never knew when something had lobster or crab or shrimp in it. She made her way to the bar and forked over the cash for a drink to tide her over until dinner.

“Ms. Bennet,” a gentle male voice came from behind her shoulder.

Tensing, she put on a smile and turned to face the police lieutenant. "Kent! Good to see you!"

"Please, Ms. Bennet," he said, waving a shushing hand in her direction. "Call me Lieutenant Collins."

Liza blinked slowly, reminded herself that he could probably arrest her if he wanted, and spoke slowly. "Okay, Lieutenant Collins. How are you doing lately?"

"Oh, you know," he said, smiling at her as if they were in on a secret together. "Same old, same old."

"Police work is that dull, eh?"

He chuckled. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. But it does all tend to blur together. We arrest them, they go to jail, they get out, and we arrest them again. It's not like your line of work, all loose ends tied up and out of the way."

Liza plastered her fake smile on even tighter. "Yes, well, vampires are not humans, nor are they citizens in our community, so they aren't entitled to things like due process or, you know, basic human rights."

"Exactly my point!" he said, pointing at her as if she had said something ground-breaking. "You aren't hampered by the system the way we are!"

"Excuse me," she said loudly. "I need to go... and... not... be here." She strode away as fast as her five-inch stilettos would allow, fuming all the way. A ranking police officer had just hinted that he would prefer to be able to kill criminals at will and that her job of hunting actual, life-sucking vampires was easier than police work because vampires required slaying, rather than a judicial system.

"Jane," she sing-songed as she grabbed her friend's elbow. "You'd be proud of me."

Jane kept her smile on her face as Liza steered her across the ballroom. "I hope you have a good reason for pulling me away," Jane hissed, the smile never leaving her face.

"I managed not to throw my drink at Lieutenant Collins."

Jane's eyebrows shot upward. "Oh. Well that is an accomplishment, well done."

"I just need to put some distance between us."

"That required my assistance?"

"Your witness. I needed to know that you were watching me so I wouldn't do something stupid."

"You know, someday you're going to have to be a big girl and refrain from throwing drinks all by yourself."

"Yes, but thankfully today is not that day, and today I still have you!" Liza grinned and raised her drink in salute.

Jane rolled her eyes good naturedly, smiling, and clinked glasses with Liza. They stood together in the blandly beige ballroom, letting the inoffensive jazz music wash over them. Sipping her cocktail, Liza looked around lazily. Jane would let her know when a potential donor was within striking distance. She could enjoy the calm until then. Her eyes roved over a sea of black tuxedos and black cocktail dresses, lots of pot-bellied men and Botoxed women, with a handful of young, blonde mistresses with fake tits sprinkled in for good measure.

"Oh," Liza breathed, looking over Jane's shoulder.

Jane turned to follow her gaze. "Oh," she repeated softly when she found the two men who Liza had seen walk into their line of view. She smoothed her shiny brown hair and squared her shoulders. "Do you know either of them?"

"Something about the one on the right looks familiar," Liza said, cocking her head to the side as she tried to place him. "But I definitely *want* to know him. Or his friend. Either of them, really. Or both. Both could be fun."

"Me too," Jane said. "Yowza."

"Yowza? Really?"

"I mean, they are easily the hottest guys to walk into one of these events that I can remember."

A pair of men in tuxedos, both apparently in their late thirties, maybe early forties, but in shockingly good shape for their ages, stood on the opposite side of the dance floor.



They both held a bottle of beer in their hand, a stark contrast to the fancy cocktails most guests were sipping. Liza's eyes focused on the familiar-looking one, but she couldn't figure out where she could possibly know him from. Something about his build, his mannerisms. He moved like an athlete, back straight and arms pulled slightly away from his sides, as if his muscles were just a smidge too big for his jacket to fit comfortably.

Jane started up a conversation with a tech mogul who was looking to offload a big donation at the end of the year. Liza half-listened to the conversation, knowing Jane would be more capable of securing the donation they needed, while she watched the man across the dance floor.

He had the slightest scruff on a chiseled jaw with just the tiniest touch of gray to it. The same barest hint of gray flecked his temples, but otherwise his hair was thick and shiny. Movie star hair. Maybe that's where she knew him? Maybe he was a minor celebrity? It wouldn't be unheard of at a mayor's dinner like this. Los Angeles was positively teeming with B- and C-list celebrities always on the lookout for a red carpet or a cameraman or literally anything that could garner them a tiny bit of extra attention.

The handsome stranger scanned the room without dropping the conversation with his companion once. His eyes – dark, brooding eyes – missed nothing, focusing on something new constantly. Liza waited for them to focus on her, practically willed them to do so.

When his eyes finally did catch hers, she sucked in a breath, feeling pinned by his gaze.

Jane's conversation faded into the background as Liza watched this man across the dance floor. He spoke to his companion, never taking his eyes off her. Gone was the lazily roving gaze, his eyes focused solely on her, a heat creeping up her body as she stared at him.

There wasn't much time for dating in Liza's world – having a job that kept her busy exclusively during the

nighttime hours was a big part of that – but the occasional hookup after fundraising events wasn't out of the question.

And if anyone was worthy of a one-night stand, it was the smoldering mystery man with a humble beer in his hand.

Liza pulled the olive out of her drink, thinking of Cher in *Clueless*: anything you can do to bring attention to your mouth is good. She put the olive between her front teeth and pulled the toothpick out gently, slowly. She held the olive in her teeth, letting her lips rest softly on it, maintaining eye contact with the stranger as she did so.

He put his beer to his lips but paused, his eyes flicking down to her mouth. Liza used the very tip of her tongue to sweep the olive away, letting her tongue slide across her deep red lipstick, pursing her lips just slightly when she was done.

The stranger finally took a swig of his drink, color rising in his cheeks. Liza gave him a small smile and turned back to Jane and her conversation, letting her sideways glance linger on his eyes for a moment.

He'd come find her now. She was sure of it. She made certain her shoulders were back, tits and ass out. Thank god she'd worn her red heels and a pushup bra under the black sequined dress that just barely skimmed the middle of her thighs. No knee-length or – god forbid – floor-length mysteries for her.

Salads were being placed on tables, the sign that cocktail hour was over and dinner was about to officially begin. Liza wanted to steer Jane across the room, find a way to sit at the sexy stranger's table, but Jane grabbed Liza by the elbow and pressed her toward a seat nearby.

"I've got a donation big enough to run us for a year," Jane murmured in Liza's ear. She smiled at a paunchy man with a pretty convincing facelift beneath his very bushy eyebrows. "Don't blow this."

“Why would I blow it?” Liza whispered back, dropping into her chair next to the donor.

“Mr. Sexy Dark Eyes will still be here in an hour. Give me until then. They are going to want to hear from you.”

“Ugh. Why do they always want to hear from me?”

“You’re the one who actually kills the vampires. You’re the one they’re really supporting.”

“Fine. But if I go home alone tonight—”

“I’ll make it up to you by continuing to collect enough money for us to pay rent and buy food and stuff.”

Liza swallowed her annoyance. Jane didn’t deserve it. She never did. Jane was the best part of Liza’s life. It definitely wasn’t Jane’s fault that Liza’s longest relationship had been with a vibrator.

They sat, Jane on Liza’s right and the potential donors to Liza’s left. Jane opened the conversation by speaking across Liza, getting the ball rolling.

Liza had answered these questions hundreds of times before. She knew which stories would play well with donors – they liked a quick hunt with minimal complications and usually no gory details. This conversation was no different. She feigned humility and pretended to be squeamish about getting blood on her hands, giving just enough to be provocative but not enough to ruin everyone’s steak dinner.

The donor – a man named William Garrett who made his fortunes in speculations and treated his wife like an actual trophy – was a perfectly predictable audience. Gasping in just the right places, raising his eyebrows in perfect incredulity, laughing at Liza’s audacity. Jane would have this wrapped up by the end of the night, no sweat.

As desserts were being served, the mayor got up to the podium, ready for the evening’s presentation. The self-congratulatory speech would last twenty minutes or so, announcing a couple new “exciting” contracts (nobody ever really thought they were exciting – unless they were the one suddenly getting paid a seven-figure income) and then

cutting everyone loose for the dancing, drinking, getting-a-hotel-room-with-a-stranger portion of the evening.

Liza craned her neck, trying to find the sexy stranger.

"Stop that," Jane muttered.

"Stop what?"

"You look like a kid trying to get a peek at Mickey Mouse while you're still in line."

Liza threw Jane a scowl but stopped craning. She'd find him later. Dessert was a chocolate lava cake with a dollop of whipped cream and a sliced strawberry – leave it to the mayor to serve thoroughly unimaginative food all night long. Liza dipped her spoon into the whipped cream and licked it off, slowly and deliberately. Just in case.

Jane caught her eye and gave her a pointed look, but didn't say anything.

"Two new exciting contracts to announce," the mayor was saying. He clicked his little presentation button and a new image popped up on the screen behind him and Liza gasped.

The sexy stranger was up on the mayor's slideshow, his face plastered beneath a logo for a company Liza had heard of but never thought would come to the west coast.

Liza's stomach felt like it was going to fall out of her butt. Out of his tuxedo and in dark jeans and a zipped-up leather jacket, he looked dangerous and brooding. In the photo, his arms were crossed, emphasizing the bulk of his muscular arms and shoulders, and Liza was sure that most women in the room were looking at that photo with the same hunger she had looked into his eyes with earlier.

She now realized why something about him had felt familiar.

He wasn't a minor celebrity or an athlete.

He was the man Liza had stopped in the alley the previous night.

And he had gotten the contract Jane had been hoping for.

“Nether Fields, Incorporated will be handling the city’s nocturnal predator elimination program,” the mayor droned. “As an act of good faith, they have already begun work in the Los Angeles area. They’ve had great success in Houston, New Orleans, Denver, and Phoenix. We’re excited to see what they’re capable of here in the city of angels.”

Liza watched the screen change once again, putting up a logo for another company, another contract. She didn’t hear the rest of the mayor’s speech. She played with the chocolate lava on her plate, smearing it around, drawing little designs in it with her spoon. The donors at the table applauded enthusiastically at every announcement the mayor made, but Liza didn’t want to hear any of it.

Beside her, she could feel Jane deflating, too. Jane had worked so hard, she didn’t deserve to be kicked aside like this. And now Liza would be going home alone, because there was no way she was going to sleep with the enemy.

And he was the enemy, even if he didn’t know it. He had stolen her contract and ruined her Hunt. He had no right – no. right. – being as sexy as he was. Yet another thing for her to be angry about. Contract stealing and Hunt ruining and too sexy for his own good. Who did he think he was, running around in leather jackets and tuxedos and making all the money?

Nether Fields, Inc.

She had heard of them, of course. A for-profit hunting group, up to their eyeballs in venture capital, hunting vampire populations all across North America. Never succeeding entirely, of course – you could never fully eliminate a population of predators who could actively grow their ranks – but making a sizable dent. Flashy weapons, a few high-profile takedowns, and then they moved on, leaving the oldest and most restrained vampires behind. They knew how to take down the young, the reckless, the ostentatious, but it was always up to the more experienced

Hunters like Liza's team to take on the more dangerous and experienced vampires.

For the greater good, of course.

These venture capital dudebros - and they were *always* dudebros - collected their contracts and moved on. Then city budgets were strained but vampires still roved the dark, and someone had to step in and take care of it.

Had to step in and take care of it without a lucrative government contract to get it done. Liza had been working with donors' money her entire career. Some years, especially early on, she had made so little money that she had qualified for food stamps and Medicaid; her own bitter version of a government contract, she supposed.

Here in LA, Jane had been able to secure steady financing. They had never once been approached about a city contract, even though they worked closely with the police when necessary. They had applied for them constantly, though. Every time a new program for small businesses or safety programs or public works or anything remotely related to their work came up, Jane was all over it. They had submitted so many documents and statements over the years that Liza could have printed them out and wallpapered an entire theme park with them. She had assumed tonight would be their night; and now she felt so stupid for thinking so. For thinking the contract would be a *pleasant surprise* rather than something already set in stone before the night began.

Humiliation burned up her cheeks.

The asshole had watched her lips with her olive. Had he recognized her from last night? Was that why he had stared? She had been planning on having sex with him. Shame sluiced through her. Not about the sex, but about the partner. The slimey dudebro with the contract that should have been hers. The man who came to town, gobbling up the capital, leaving behind a perfectly good market and business in some other city. Why did he have to come here?

Why make the change? There was already an established vampire-hunting business here.

She pushed up from the table and stalked to the exit, fumbling in her clutch for her phone as she went. Jane had driven her here; she'd have to get an Uber. The presentation had wrapped and people were getting up from their chairs all over the ballroom. Liza had to get out before the socializing started back up again. She turned sideways between two men getting up from adjacent tables, squeezing through before their backsides closed the gap and she'd have to find another way around.

She made it out of the ballroom and down the blandly carpeted hallway to the elevator that would take her to the parking garage beneath the modestly fancy hotel.

"Liza, wait," Jane's voice stopped her as she was getting on the elevator.

Liza held the doors as her friend rushed in, heels in hand, cheeks flushed.

"You didn't have to—" she started but Jane interrupted her.

"It's fine, the donation is all locked up. You did great, by the way."

Liza harrumphed.

"You couldn't have known—" but this time it was Liza's turn to interrupt.

"It was the guy from last night."

Jane's brow furrowed.

"The guy, in the alley. Who stopped my Hunt."

"No!" Jane's response was a gasp as much as anything. Her shoulders slumped and her purse slipped off her shoulder, dangling from her hand when she caught it before it hit the floor.

"Yeah."

"He stopped your Hunt, *and* he got the new contract? Man." She straightened herself out and put her shoes back

on. "I almost want you to go back in there and sleep with him just so you can squeeze his junk off his body."

Liza snorted. "Maybe next time," she said. But she did feel a little better just imagining it.



## CHAPTER FOUR – DARCY

As soon as the mayor's presentation was finished, Darcy sat back in his chair, hoping to catch a glimpse of the blonde in the sparkly black dress who had caught his eye earlier. He hated himself for being turned on by the stupid little stunt with the olive, but he had most *definitely* been turned on by it. Besides, there was something incredibly sexy about a woman who made her attraction and intention known but didn't eliminate all the fun of the pursuit. The opening flirtation was half the fun, and he liked a woman who would play the game for a bit.

All through the presentation, he had leaned back, conscious of keeping his chin up, his jawline exposed. No good slouching and looking like a schlub. A few appreciative glances came his way when his contract had been announced, though Brett was the one who deserved the credit for that. Darcy was just the muscle, Brett was the real brains behind the entire operation. Marketing, bookkeeping, tracking, contracts, all of it. Darcy had realized during business school that none of that work appealed to him and he was more than happy to hand it off to Brett, who was more than happy to sit at headquarters reviewing footage of Darcy getting an ass-beating every couple weeks.

Music started up and people all around the room got up from their seats. Some took to the dance floor, though most had not yet had enough liquor to justify such an action.

Darcy peered out of the corner of his eye to where he thought the blonde bombshell had been sitting. She'd been blocked from his line of view during the mayor's dreadful presentation, only becoming visible if just the right combination of people shifted in their seats in the exact

right way. He had caught miniscule glances of her, licking her spoon or smiling at someone next to her.

God. The spoon-licking. The stunt with the olive had been enough, but watching her tongue clean that whipped cream off the silver, her perfectly painted lips closing around it, made him imagine something else in her mouth and he was getting hard just thinking about it again. If he had thought the olive was a coincidence, the spoon had been another signal that she was *at least* open to having a conversation. See what happened from there. He hadn't had a lot of luck dating in California yet, but maybe tonight would be his chance to change his luck.

But now her seat was empty, pushed back haphazardly away from the table, as if she had left in a hurry.

Darcy sat upright, looking around for her. When had she left? Or was she still here, dancing somewhere? Talking to someone else? Maybe he had misinterpreted her actions, maybe she hadn't been flirting.

He immediately relaxed his posture, realizing how ridiculous it must look for him to be swiveling his head around, eyes wide, like Bambi looking for his mother.

What an idiot. He should have introduced himself to her before dinner was served. Now he'd lost his chance. If he'd even had one to begin with. A sexy mouth that slowly and deliberately devoured things wasn't exactly a marriage proposal.

The next hour passed in a blur of bombastic voices coming out of tipsy men who all suddenly needed to congratulate Darcy on the new contract. Always the same drill: they want to congratulate him, pick his brain about how they too can get their own contract, maybe be introduced to some of his investors? Over the years, Darcy had found it more and more difficult to navigate the conversations with any social grace.

He felt his smile tighten, his enthusiasm waning with every interaction. Brett kept close, helping Darcy navigate out of a conversation before it got too terrible. It wouldn't be a good idea to be insulting the business community so quickly after setting up shop in town. In addition to the city contract, many of these business owners and investors would pay top-dollar for preferential treatment when it came to vampire Hunting.

Nobody wanted a vampire infestation at a theme park, after all, and those companies had always enjoyed a little special treatment when it came to maintaining a public image of safety and security. They'd pay extra for it, for sure. Darcy had fulfilled plenty of contracts for related businesses in other states, but the big kahunas were here in southern California, and he wasn't dumb enough to blow it.

Darcy finally called it a night when he saw a city councilman making out with a woman that was much too young to be his wife on the dance floor. Sloppy drunks were no fun, and even Brett couldn't make an argument for networking with people who wouldn't remember them the next morning. The music had been turned up way too loud and servers were clearing tables and cutting people off at the bar. The night was over and Darcy would be going home with Brett to have a date with his own right hand instead of a beautiful blonde in a sparkly dress. Again.

Brett handed the valet ticket over and Darcy pulled out cash for a tip. The drive back to home/headquarters was quiet, Darcy lost in his own thoughts and Brett content to listen to the radio playing softly in the background. Brett was the extrovert between them - obviously - but he knew how much Darcy needed to decompress after these kinds of events. Brett might even head out to a bar or a movie, always making new friends, always up for more fun. Darcy admired that in his friend, but it also sounded exhausting.

Once they got home, Brett did indeed get changed and head back out and Darcy made a beeline for his

bedroom upstairs.

It was barely ten o'clock, and Darcy found he wasn't really tired. He exercised for a while, working out the coiled energy that had nowhere to go since he wasn't having sex with the mystery blonde tonight. He stripped down to just his running shorts and sneakers, letting his torso breathe. Tonight wasn't a scheduled workout, so he didn't really have a plan. Treadmill for a couple miles, weighted pullups and then maybe some core work. Some yoga-like movement to cool down, try to drown out the images of a blonde and her sensuous mouth.

After his workout, Darcy showered and spent a crazy-long time grooming his beard and... some other things, too.

Still not tired, he tried reading, tried watching tv, but nothing held his attention. Lying in bed, he pulled out his laptop. Since he couldn't have the sexy blonde with the olive in her teeth, he'd settle for figuring out who his competition was. The woman who had blocked him from getting his job done the previous night.

He didn't think he'd actually find her; most Hunters were shit at marketing, but whoever was running her web presence had done a good job. After searching "vampire hunters los angeles" he found her website, listed just below his. He had to admit, Brett was doing a damn good job, too.

Darcy clicked on her page and went straight to the "about" section. Some bits about the founding of her company (ten years ago), her education (a bachelor's in archeology), and her background (a former competitive CrossFit athlete).

Liza Bennet claimed to be a southern California native, but Darcy doubted that. Nobody grew up here, everyone was a transplant, as far as he could tell.

He scrolled down to where a photo of her dominated the bottom half of the page and stopped cold.

It was her.

Not just the woman from last night – he was sure of that much already – but the woman from the mayor’s dinner. With the olive. And the sexy shoulders.

Her complexion didn’t scream “California native and therefore a steady beach-goer” by any stretch of the imagination; porcelain-like with a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. The barest hint of laugh lines at the corners of her eyes, with full lips and ashy blonde hair that spilled over her shoulders. He couldn’t tell what color her eyes were – gray? Light blue?

One thing was for sure, she looked like she could kick some ass. Rounded muscles in her shoulders and upper arms, emphasized by the way she folded her arms across her chest. The black tank top she wore showed off her other formidable assets, all of which he had seen on display in the slinky black dress she’d been wearing tonight. She hadn’t looked so hardened at the dinner, the makeup and the sparkles, and the sub-par lighting had all softened her edges, made her look less imposing.

Imposing wasn’t a bad thing; the muscled woman with a death glare in this photo was still gorgeous.

But she was definitely his competition. And stiff competition, too.

Darcy hated himself for what he was about to do, but he was antsy and bored and angry at himself, so he opened a new tab and searched for her on social media. He wasn’t a heavy social media user, so navigating around was always a little annoying, and he had to be extra careful that he didn’t accidentally like or share something while he was doing his reconnaissance.

She had very little presence he could find other than her official business website. Looked like a defunct profile on a social media site mostly meant for college kids, the profile pic old enough that it was likely from her college days or very shortly thereafter. Either she was very private or she was using a fake name somewhere.

Darcy didn't need to know which. He didn't care, he told himself. He snapped the laptop shut and plugged it in for the night.

Lying in bed, he forced himself to think of something other than the blonde woman. Liza. He wouldn't think about her lips or the way she caressed them with the very tip of her tongue. He wouldn't think about her pressed up against his back, her knife at his throat, the way she smelled of soap and leather. He wouldn't imagine what it would be like to explore—

No, really. He wouldn't think about any of it.

He flipped the light off and turned over to go to sleep.

## CHAPTER FIVE – LIZA

Liza let the barbell drop as the buzzer sounded. She flopped to her hands and knees, chest heaving, sweat dripping from her face and spattering on the rubber mats beneath her. Other athletes came by to give her fist bumps and congratulations as she loosened her wrist supports and grip protectors.

“Why do I let you drag me here?” Jane complained in between huge gulping breaths. She rolled from her knees to her back but quickly rolled back, gasping for breath.

Liza wheezed before answering. “It’s good for us.”

“Good for you,” Jane objected. She reached for the band of her sports bra, pulling it away from her chest, trying to give her lungs room to expand. “You’re the one out chasing... killing... ugh.”

Liza nodded. She knew what Jane was getting at: Liza was the one who needed to maintain top-notch fitness to have any hope of succeeding as a vampire Hunter. As the finance and business person, Jane didn’t need competitive cardiovascular performance.

“It makes your ass and legs look great,” Liza offered up, her breathing was beginning to return to normal, but she could tell she would feel the burn in her lungs for the rest of the day.

“Oh. Right.” Jane’s breathing was slowing slightly, though her cheeks were still flushed and she seemed a little too wobbly to stand up just yet. Liza stood and put a hand out, offering to pull Jane up off the floor of the City of Angels CrossFit. Jane accepted the pull and they both got to work putting their gear away. They stayed for some light accessory work; Liza did it for the work itself, Jane did it to be nice to Liza. Then they said their goodbyes to the eleven

o'clock class and headed back to Jane's apartment that served as their offices.

While Liza drove Jane back to her apartment, Jane checked her phone. She sipped her post-workout shake while scrolling through emails and text notifications.

"Catherine is charging us," she muttered.

"Great." Liza huffed a little. "I'm gonna send the bill to the Nether Fields guys. They can pay her for the night we *didn't* get a kill."

"Sure. Let me know how that works out for you."

Liza adjusted her sunglasses; everything touching her face felt uncomfortable when her face was this sweaty after a workout, but she also couldn't handle the L.A. sun without them. Hazard of working nights, she supposed.

"We've got a lead," Jane said.

"For tonight?"

"Yep, tonight. You gonna be ready?"

"Of course, why wouldn't I be?"

"You just PR'd a 50-minute AMRAP. I'd feel like jelly for two straight days if I pushed as hard as you did."

"I'll be fine. I'll shower and stretch and rest and eat and I'll be ready. Same place as last time?"

It was a brief moment before Jane answered, scrolling through her information. "No, but it's actually closer to home. Shorter setup time."

"Sounds perfect." Liza pulled up in front of Jane's building and unlocked the doors. "I'll be back for you around, what? Nine? Ten?"

"Let's make it nine, just to be on the safe side."

"Nine it is. See you then."

Liza waited until Jane was through the security gate into the apartment building, giving a quick wave goodbye as she pulled away.

Relentless sunshine beat down on her windshield as she drove the couple miles to her apartment, stopping for a couple of tacos on the way. Her thoughts kept straying to the



Nether Fields guy – Darcy, according to his website – and Liza turned her radio up to try to drown those thoughts out. She tried not to think about how he had smelled of sandalwood or how he looked in a leather jacket. She definitely tried not to think about how he would look *out* of that leather jacket, what lurked beneath the black jeans he'd been wearing in his publicity photo.

It would probably be disappointing, she convinced herself. It wasn't muscles filling out that tuxedo, it was just regular middle-aged bulk. Yeah. That was it. He used all the fancy tech and gear while he was Hunting because he couldn't cut it with his own body. Liza repeated this to herself over and over again as she pulled into her apartment complex's parking lot. He relied on money, not skill. Electronics, not muscle. He was more like Iron Man than Captain America.

By the time she was in the shower, she was imagining a combination of Iron Man and Captain America with her and all thoughts of Darcy the dudebro were chased out of her mind.

Eight hours, one shower, two meals, and a four-hour nap later, Liza picked Jane up for the evening's Hunt. Jane plugged her phone into the car's system so Liza could follow directions to the pin Catherine had dropped for them.

"Alright, maybe she's worth the money we pay her," Liza grumbled.

"She is," Jane said, with earnestness that only Jane could muster for nearly every single person she talked about. "I still wish we hadn't been blocked the other night."

"Same."

After a twenty-minute drive, Liza slowed down, letting the engine cut down to using just the battery, her hybrid moving in silence down the darkened block.

The navigation system announced that they had "arrived" and Liza let the car inch forward until she had a

perfect parking space. Near enough to the alley that they could escape quickly if need be, far enough away from the sparse streetlights that they could move undetected for a little while. She left the keys in the ignition, flipped the interior lights off, and got out of the car. She pressed her door shut, rather than slamming it, making as little noise as possible. Jane stayed in the car, her screens darkened, using the car's WiFi rather than the shoddy cell signal in this part of town.

"You really should consider coloring your hair," Jane whispered into the communication device in Liza's ear.

Liza threw a dirty look over her shoulder. They'd had this conversation a thousand times, but Liza hated the idea of the maintenance of a starkly dark hair color covering her mostly-natural blonde. Besides, it hadn't ever been her *hair* that caused a problem. Jane just raised her eyebrows in response to Liza's dirty look; she insisted that there was no point in dressing all in black, if Liza was just going to walk around with a pair of blonde braids down her back.

Catherine materialized from the shadows, falling into step beside Liza without saying a word. She was the Hunter who had trained Liza and Jane both, and who had picked Liza to be her successor in the field. Catherine had officially retired from Hunting several years earlier, saying she was too old for the business. Liza doubted that very much; Catherine was nearly as fit as Liza was, despite the thirty-year age difference. Not only was the woman fit and trim, her face was Botoxed into perfect smoothness, her hair always pulled back into an impossibly chic ponytail, exposing her graceful neck. No matter how chilly the air got, she wore deep v-neck sweaters with no collar or coat to cover up the arteries that vampires so desperately desired.

They weren't hunting 465 tonight, but a younger vampire who had been attacking nightly in this industrial part of town.

“He used to work here,” Catherine said softly as they made their way down the broken sidewalk. Streetlights were scarce here, and the sidewalk often crumbling away to meet the street, having been driven over by countless trucks with heavy loads. “He hasn’t even ventured away yet. I assume he was turned, or completed his metamorphosis, while at his place of employment.” She pointed to a warehouse up ahead, the epicenter of the recent attacks. Workers, homeless people, animals – the latter left to bleed out, as most vampires preferred human blood, especially in the early years – had been attacked with alarming regularity for the last several nights. Someone had called it into the police, even though it was clearly a vampire and not a human serial killer, and Lieutenant Collins had handed it over to Jane today. Lack of a city contract wouldn’t stop him from sending them business occasionally, she hoped.

“Should be simple then,” Jane murmured into Liza’s earpiece.

Liza twisted her mouth into a grimace and shared a look with Catherine. Jane was smart, but it irked Liza how optimistic and naïve she was about the actual hunting part of their operation. Catherine gave a slight shake of her head, indicating that Liza should let the issue drop, and then the two women parted ways.

Catherine continued walking, pulling out her phone to feign being lost. She would look at her maps app and turn it this way and that, looking every bit confused as an elderly tourist who took ten wrong turns to wind up where they were. Young vampires didn’t necessarily need a believable backstory for their victims, but the older ones were usually shrewd enough to tell when they were being baited, so Catherine consistently acted the part. Never wavering.

Liza melted into the shadows Catherine had so recently vacated, pulling stakes from her coat as she went.

Pressing her back against the cold steel of a warehouse, Liza waited. She kept her breathing slow and

even, her heart rate low, as she slowly and gently stretched her legs. The night was chilled and misty, and she needed to be ready to run in an instant.

"Movement across from you," Jane's voice came softly in Liza's ear.

Liza stopped moving and focused on the lumberyard across the street. Huge stacks of wood provided plenty of places for a vampire to hide, or for a vampire to stash a body after he was done with it.

Catherine's footsteps sounded nearby, shuffling and clacking far too loudly, trying to draw attention from what lurked in the night.

"He's moving slowly," Jane said.

He was learning to be more careful, more methodical. It was a sign that the vampire was maturing, readying himself to leave his lair and try to integrate into the city. Integration brought a bizarre kind of monstrous social life, better chances for more blood, easier escape. Once a vampire started integrating, he'd probably join a hive and serve as a drone to a vampire queen, seeking protection through the pseudo-familial bonds of a hive. If he didn't get killed by rivals drones or executed for crossing a queen. Here, though, he was alone, at the mercy of the fates to deliver victims to him, to allow him to keep feeding without being caught.

But fate would catch him before he had a chance to move on.

Liza would kill this vampire tonight.

A darting movement caught her eye, despite the darkness.

Liza kept her focus on the spot she'd seen shift in the shadows, but out of the corner of her eye, she could sense Catherine.

Catherine, dressed in bright colors, holding her phone aloft, as if searching for a signal, spinning slowly in place,

making it seem like she was accidentally finding herself in the middle of the street.

“Take the bait, you monster,” Liza whispered.

Every muscle in Liza’s body was tensed, coiled, ready to spring into action.

She kept her side pressed against the cold steel wall, the shadows of the warehouse engulfing her until she was ready to run.

Another movement.

Liza had her mark, and she couldn’t have planned this better. She was closer to Catherine than the vampire was, in the perfect position to intercept him as he took the bait and went after her mentor.

Liza crouched just slightly, her heartbeat accelerating at the anticipation of a fight.

A flash of movement and Liza sprang forward.

“WAIT!” Jane shouted into Liza’s ear, but Liza was already gone.

Sneakers propelling her across the pavement, stakes in hand, Liza was ready.

The street blurred.

Catherine whirled as a dark shape hurtled out of the lumberyard. Liza was going to get there first, and the thought gave her an extra burst of speed.

But then the vampire collapsed, mid-stride, his body dropping to the pavement and skidding toward Catherine.

Liza pulled up short, stakes up, her eyes frantically searching the darkness.

“There’s another one!” Jane’s voice sounded hysterical, and Liza realized just how fast this had all happened.

“Not another one,” a low voice said.

Liza whipped toward the gravelly male voice, saw Catherine do the same in her peripheral vision. Liza instinctively moved toward the older woman, keeping her stakes pointed in the direction of the voice.

“Your comms are too loud, too easy to intercept,” the voice continued as a man started to materialize in the darkness. He strutted toward the vampire’s body, shouldering a weapon as he did so.

“You!” Liza’s breath whooshed out of her body.

The man from the mayor’s dinner, the one who had won the city contract, who had ruined her hunt two nights previous. Darcy DeLaurens. Damn it. He was hotter than she remembered. Than she had convinced herself of.

“Liza Bennet,” he said nonchalantly, nodding slightly at her. “It’s nice to formally meet you. I’m Darcy, of Nether Fields. And you nearly ruined my Hunt.”

## CHAPTER SIX – DARCY

Darcy watched as Liza Bennet spluttered indignantly, amused by how easy it was to provoke a reaction out of her. She recovered fairly quickly, though, and straightened her spine, glaring at him. The spark of anger in her eyes was intriguing. Not embarrassment at losing a Hunt, not the same sexy flirtiness that had been there the night before, but a cold fury that he might have quailed beneath if he had been any other man, one who hadn't been trained to kill monsters in the night.

Turning away from that glint, and the older graceful woman who stood nearby, looking much less frail and confused than she had only a moment earlier, he took a picture of the vampire's body; it was currently dead but could still reanimate if he didn't finish the job. Documentation was important, though. It was how he proved his worth to investors and contract approvers. Bodycam footage had captured the kill, but high-resolution still images were as good as gold on the internet.

"You think that *I* ruined *your* Hunt?" Liza said. He looked up from photographing the vampire to see her flicking her head so one of her braids fell behind her shoulder. She stood firm, feet planted hip-width apart, hands loose at her sides, stakes in each one. It appeared casual, but Darcy knew it was a fighting stance, an athletic stance; muscles at the ready, nothing tense, but nothing cooling off, either.

"No," he said calmly as he approached the vampire. With his phone recording a duplicate video while his bodycam continued rolling, he stomped on the stake that he had shot into the vampire's heart, pushing it all the way in. As the stake made contact with the ground beneath the

vampire, thus crossing all the way through the heart rather than just piercing it, the vampire exploded in a puff of dust. "I said you *nearly* ruined my Hunt. There's a difference."

"That's rich," she said.

He looked carefully at her. Even in the darkness, he could see anger in her eyes.

"You're mad at me?" he asked, smiling to himself. She was making no effort to hide her feelings. Refreshing. Her anger could probably heat up the cool late autumn night. "What for?"

She barked out a laugh, her eyes going wide. "What for?" She was shouting now. She pointed at him as she talked, shifting her weight from one foot to another, restless energy propelling her. "What for, you ask? For ruining my Hunt the other night, for stealing this Hunt tonight—"

"Stealing? How can I steal a Hunt?"

"Hello?" she yelled sarcastically, throwing her arms wide. "You just killed the vampire that I was about to kill!"

The older woman at her side pulled at her elbow, muttering Liza's name and shaking her head slightly. No, she wasn't the confused tourist she had been pretending to be. She held onto Liza's arm with surprising strength until Liza yanked free, her attention all on Darcy.

"I think the key phrase here," he said, watching her fume, "Is 'about to'. You were 'about to' kill this vampire, but I got him first. And," he shook his phone at her, "I have proof."

She continued spluttering at him as he sent the video to Brett and made sure it was saved in the cloud. It had only taken a single destroyed phone for him to learn that lesson.

The older woman – who he assumed had been used as bait – was grabbing at Liza's arm again, her free hand to her ear, as if she was listening in on her comms device. They'd heard his earlier comment, then, and dampened the volume the devices so his own devices weren't picking up on the sound. That meant someone else was nearby, or listening



from a distance, controlling the tech they were using. Which wasn't a lot; just the communication devices, as far as he could tell. Liza still had stakes in her hands. Honest-to-god wooden stakes, like this was a Buffy episode.

"It looks like you've got somewhere else to be," he said, nodding at the older woman.

Liza's head swiveled to her companion and she yanked free once again. She stalked over to Darcy, jabbing him in the chest with her finger, her hand still wrapped around the stake. He forced himself not to look at her lips, not to remember the way she had licked them the previous night, not to think the thoughts he'd been thinking almost constantly since that moment. He held her gaze, drawn to the pride and fury he saw there.

"You," she seethed, jabbing her finger into his chest, "need to just stay out of my way. I have been working here for *ten years*, and you are not going to fuck it all up for me."

"Ten whole years, huh?" He gently pushed her hand away from his chest and resisted the urge to wrap her hand up in his. Resisted the urge to lean forward and kiss her. "I've been doing this for nearly twenty, since I was seventeen. I built my business from scratch, moving to bigger and bigger cities every year. I'm not stopping now just because you're too slow and too loud."

The sound that exploded out of her was unbridled outrage, the spark in her eyes and the color in her cheeks forcing Darcy to smile. His smile, of course, only made her more furious, and she turned and stomped away, fuming and grunting all the way.

He watched her go, watched the sway of her hips and her hair bouncing against her back. Everything about her seemed powerful, and he very much looked forward to their next argument.

Back at headquarters, Brett was already working on press releases and statements to the *Los Angeles Times*.

Later, he'd be crunching numbers and figuring out exactly how much money they had earned, being two days into their contract, compared to how many vampires had been killed so far. Investors loved these nitty-gritty numbers (or, Darcy suspected, they *pretended* to love these numbers, as they were mostly a bullshit measurement anyway) and Brett was a genius at producing the ratios and profit margins and returns-on-investment everyone loved to see.

Darcy stripped off his leather jacket and accepted the traditional whiskey nightcap Brett had ready for him.

"A beautiful kill tonight," Brett said, letting the bodycam footage loop on his screen a couple of times. Darcy saw, once again, Liza sprint into the frame just as he loosed the stake from his crossbow. He flinched, realizing how close she'd been to the line of fire. He watched as the older woman spun, dropping into a fighting stance; she wasn't *just* bait, then. Squinting at the screen, Darcy wondered if she was the legendary Catherine DeBourgh, who had been active in Los Angeles and Southern California for decades. Liza ran SoCal Vampire Hunting, and that had been DeBourgh's business, once upon a time. Could feisty Liza be the protégé of the greatest female vampire Hunter of all time? If so, how could he have missed the woman's identity? Had he been *that* distracted by Liza's ferocity?

Brett let the footage loop, marveling at the timing and the accuracy, muttering at the screen, not really expecting Darcy to respond. Over and over again, Darcy's eyes found Liza on the screen, rather than the vampire or the innocent 'victim'. He watched her move, graceful and powerful, like a lioness going for a kill. He watched as she stopped on a dime, as she spun toward him, toward what she thought was a threat. The grainy footage left a lot to be desired, but Darcy's memory filled in the most interesting parts.

Darcy and Brett had worked in competitive markets before; New Orleans, in particular, had been crowded with Hunters trying to make a name for themselves. Darcy had

rarely – if ever – paused to take notice of the individuals he was competing against, though. Plenty of them had been female, and plenty of those had been angry with him for what they saw as lost business.

But none of them had made him stop and watch the way Liza Bennet had. She was certainly beautiful, but that was only a tiny part of what made him watch her. She had a bearing about her, a bearing that some would call ‘regal’ if they were inclined to make such cheesy statements. There was something about the way she got angry, as if the work meant something to her, more than a paycheck. That he meant something more than just a lost paycheck, that she *saw* him in a way other competitors didn’t.

“Rest up,” Brett said, pulling Darcy from his study of Liza, clapping him on the shoulder. “It’ll be a few days before we have another one. I can finish logging everything.”

Darcy’s shoulders sagged, the elation of the night dropping away from him. Brett was right. After a fresh kill, all the vampires in the area tended to go to ground for a few days, so he had some time to kill before going back out on the Hunt again.

Which meant he had a few days before he had any chance of seeing Liza Bennet again.

## CHAPTER SEVEN – LIZA

Liza spent the next several days in a pissy mood. Even the cool autumn breezes through the perfect southern California sunshine couldn't pull her out of her simmering anger.

"Would you knock it off?" Jane demanded. They were out to lunch with Jane's younger sister, Lydia, who was in town for a few days. She was in grad school, *again*, and Liza had little patience for the globe-trotting, debt-riddled, perennial art student.

"What?" Liza growled, though she knew what Jane was upset about. Lydia was in the bathroom (taking selfies, not actually *using* the bathroom) and would be back in, oh, maybe twenty minutes or so. They had the rickety table on the café patio to themselves for the time being. The next table over was obsessed with their dog, and they weren't paying any attention to Liza or Jane. "She doesn't even know that it's her I'm talking about."

"Well, I know," Jane said primly, dipping a torn roll into a mixture of olive oil, balsamic vinegar, and cracked pepper. "And I don't appreciate you being mean to her."

"She deserves it." Liza kept her arms folded across her chest. Her legs were crossed, too, as if she could keep everyone from bothering her if she just stayed wound tightly enough.

"No she doesn't. She's struggling. You could be compassionate."

"She's not struggling," Liza said. "She's floundering, and it's her own fault. She's twenty-eight. Time to grow up. Stop being a permanent college kid."

"Oooh! Who's a permanent college kid?" Lydia asked as she plopped down in the wrought-iron chair across from

Jane. "That sounds like fun!"

Lydia had the same dark hair Jane did, but Lydia's currently had bright purple streaks through it and was cropped asymmetrically, showing off an ear full of piercings and a lotus blossom tattoo on the nape of her neck.

Liza threw Jane her best 'told ya so' look and Jane wrinkled her nose in response.

"No one is a permanent college kid, Lydia," Jane said patiently.

"Oh." Lydia's shoulders slumped and she twisted her mouth in disappointment.

"But I bet you could be the first!" Liza said, ignoring the new nose-wrinkling she got from Jane.

"That's actually part of why I'm here," Lydia said, bouncing in her seat.

"Oh?" Liza asked warily, at the same time Jane said, "Oh?" in a bright voice, full of hope.

"Yes." Lydia squared her shoulders and adjusted her plate - a keto-friendly salad - as she looked Jane in the eyes. "As you know, I'm supposed to graduate next month."

"I know!" Jane said. "I'm so proud of you!"

Liza's eyebrows shot up. Jane sounded sincere, not exasperated or worried, which was what Liza was feeling. Liza and Jane had been best friends since elementary school, so Liza had seen Lydia in all her disastrous glory for nearly twenty-five years already. 'Graduation' didn't mean the same thing to Lydia as it did to anyone else; Lydia had graduated from college twice already, with no plans of ever moving on. One degree in 'fine arts' that Lydia hadn't been able to adequately explain, another in fashion history, and now she was working on a PhD that focused specifically on feminist portraiture.

"Thank you, Jane, that means a lot to me." Lydia beamed at Liza, obviously fishing for another compliment. Liza just raised her drink in salute before taking another sip.

Lydia shook it off. “Anywayyyyyyy... I came here to ask you a favor.”

“Oh?” Jane said, perking up. How much more perky could she get? Eventually she would be one big ball of perk.

“Here we go,” Liza muttered. She didn’t even try to hide her eyeroll, though her omnipresent sunglasses probably did some of that for her.

“Yes,” Lydia continued. She was smiling beatifically. “I was hoping you could give me a job.”

Liza spat out her drink and started coughing and laughing. Distantly, she heard Jane meekly say, “A job?”

“Yeah, I figured since you own your own company—”

“Liza owns it.”

“Well, but you *run* it—”

“We run it together.” Jane’s brow was deeply furrowed and she kept looking to Liza for help, guidance... anything. Liza was still laughing, though most of the coughing had subsided. Damn. This lunch had turned out to be a good idea. She hadn’t laughed like this in a long time. The people with the dog were staring at her.

Lydia huffed, her expression turning sour. “Well, I figured since I am your *sister* and you are *in charge* and you *make the decisions* that maybe you’d be willing to help me launch my own career.” She flopped back in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest, beaded bracelets and charms jangling as she did so.

Jane looked to Liza, panic in her eyes. Liza just shrugged and gestured for Jane to handle it. Liza started eating her lunch, the day looking more interesting by the minute.

“Well... we run on a pretty slim margin, Lydia. The business only collects a small amount of fees, almost everything we collect comes from donors, so it’s not steady income.”

“But you’re living in L.A.?” Lydia gestured around them, to the sunshine-soaked café they sat at and the BMW

parked at the meter not ten feet away. “You’re supporting yourself and her—” she flung a hand in Liza’s direction, “in one of the most expensive cities in the world.”

Liza didn’t bother trying to explain how wrong Lydia was. Instead, she returned to her double-protein pasta and let Jane try again.

“Liza does all the Hunting,” Jane said. Her voice sounded not-patient for the first time that Liza could remember. “She earns her salary. And neither of us is living large. You’ve seen my apartment.”

“I’m willing to earn it! I’ll work!”

Liza snorted but kept her head down.

“I’m sure you’re willing, hon, but we just don’t have any job openings.”

“You’re so mean to me. Dad is kicking me out—”

“When did you move back in with Dad?”

Lydia waved a hand dismissively. “Metaphorically speaking. You know I would never live under the same roof as Louise.”

Jane’s expression said she agreed entirely; their stepmother was a piece of work, and Liza wouldn’t have wanted to live with her for a second longer than necessary, either.

“But he’s not renewing my lease, so next week, I will have nowhere to live!” Her feet stomped against the ground repeatedly, like a little dance in her chair. Everything jangled and the table wobbled slightly.

“Why don’t you sign your own lease?” Liza offered. She bit down on a smile at the dirty look Lydia gave her.

“Because, *Liza*,” Lydia said Liza’s name like a curse word. “I don’t have a w-2 to prove income. I don’t have first and last month’s deposit. I don’t have any credit history.”

“You don’t have *any* credit history?” Liza said, her jaw dropping. “You’re twenty-eight. How do you not have *any* credit history? Not even a store credit card or a phone bill in your name?”

“Why would I have?” Lydia shrugged. “Dad’s always paid for everything. I mean, I pay my own bills, but it’s his name on all the accounts.”

“Oh my god,” Liza said, laughing and shaking her head and going back to her lunch.

“So,” Jane said matter-of-factly. “You move back in with Dad and Louise. You get a job, and then you get another job, so you’re never home, and you can save up a bunch of money and move out quickly. Maybe you can get a job teaching, and your academic career will serve to bolster your job experience on a credit application.”

“That only works for actual professionals, like doctors and lawyers,” Liza said. “Grad school doesn’t count as work experience when grad school is focused on Frida Kahlo and not, you know, professional job training.”

“Exactly!” Lydia said. “Thank you!”

Liza wasn’t sure why she was being thanked, but Jane threw her another dirty look anyway. “I don’t know, Lydia, maybe you can come stay with me—”

“Oh, thank you!” Lydia jumped up and threw her arms around Jane, who looked horrified. “You won’t regret this. I’ll bring my stuff by this weekend.”

“This weekend is Thanksgiving,” Jane said.

“And you said you weren’t graduating until next month,” Liza added.

Lydia waved her hand again. “Oh yeah, I’m not gonna finish anytime soon, and I can work on my dissertation anywhere. I just need internet. I can meet with my advisors on Zoom.”

Liza and Jane exchanged a meaningful look.

“Excuse me, miss?” Liza called their server over. “Another round of drinks, please.”

Lydia was still an absolute disaster. But now it was going to be Jane’s responsibility to take care of her.



## CHAPTER EIGHT – DARCY

Darcy parked his car in front of City of Angels Crossfit, his fifth CrossFit box in as many days. Brett didn't buy Darcy's 'I'm just looking for a place to work out while we're here' excuse, but he also wasn't trying to stop him from gym-hopping. Darcy was wasting money on drop-in fees, especially considering he had a ton of space and equipment at home, his apartment building had a state-of-the-art gym, and his younger sister was trainer-to-the-stars, Giana DeLaurens, and she could more than keep him on his toes.

He stifled a groan as he got out of the car, dragging his gym bag with him. He prided himself on staying in shape, but CrossFit was turning out to be no joke, and doubling up on workouts was probably a mistake. Every muscle was sore – muscles he didn't even know he had were sore. He'd been introduced to the horror-pleasure that was foam rolling the previous day and he wanted to both kill and kiss the trainer who had rolled out his quads after a workout full of throwing a weighted ball up at a target for twenty minutes straight.

The box – they didn't like being called '*gyms*' apparently – sat at the corner of a strip mall, chalk and spray-painted lines on the ground marking running routes around the back of the plaza. City of Angels CrossFit had their front doors thrown wide open. Hip hop music, industrial fans, and clanging barbells sounded from inside.

Darcy knew the drill by now: he talked with one of the coaches, told them his exercise habits and history, that he was new in town, and he paid a drop-in fee to be able to participate in the class. At least now he could honestly answer 'yes' when they asked if he had done CrossFit before, and skip over the lecture about intensity and safety. He

signed a waiver, scanning the industrial-like space for any sign of Liza Bennet. His heart sank when he didn't see her. Class was set to start in less than five minutes, and he had learned that CrossFitters were *never* late; having to run extra or do extra burpees as a consequence for tardiness tended to make everyone punctual.

He didn't think he could do another CrossFit workout today if she wasn't going to be here. His lats were already more sore than he ever imagined they could be, and his palms were starting to tear from all the pullups and kettlebell swings over the last four days.

He was about to make his excuses – he debated between 'I have to take this call' and 'I left my water in the car' – when she walked in.

Stormed in, more like.

Her hair was pulled back in the same complicated set of braids, but her face was a thundercloud. Full lips pressed into a thin line, jaw clenched, eyes narrowed and focused straight ahead, she didn't even notice him as she sped past and took her place in the small class.

Darcy took his place at the back of the semi-circle-ish clump of athletes – they all referred to themselves thusly – as the coach explained the day's warmup and workout. The movements were familiar, at least. This one was kettlebell thrusters, burpees, and double-unders, which was just an amped-up version of jumping rope, but they were combined and sped up to make a cardio workout that was sure to make Darcy want to die. At least it was only twenty minutes. He could do anything for twenty minutes.

Hopefully.

The circle broke up and everyone went to get the gear they needed and set themselves up in a loose grid formation facing the coach's whiteboard. Liza still didn't notice him as she stormed around the box. He tried to say 'hi' once but she blew past him and he pretended to need to sneeze to explain the weird expression on his face.

Then he spent the next two minutes absolutely hating himself for it.

He should leave.

This was stupid.

He was stupid. He was so fucking stupid, thinking he could 'accidentally' run into her at her own gym – after he systematically tried every CrossFit gym in the area – and have a normal conversation with this woman.

In the end, Darcy was too chicken to duck out. Too committed to the silent social contract everyone behaved by and that he wished he could throw out the window.

He stayed.

Halfway through the warm-up, Liza spotted him. Her face grew even stormier, if such a thing was possible. She glared at him as they stretched, and then studiously ignored him as she blew past him on the 800-meter run through the empty half of the parking lot. Darcy hated himself every step of that run, his sneakers pounding on the pavement as his legs felt like concrete. Too many workouts in too few days, and it was all catching up to him.

The air was cool and crisp by California standards, but the sun still beat down relentlessly, necessitating dark sunglasses at all times. First Liza, then most of the rest of the class hit the halfway point in the run and turned around, passing Darcy in the opposite direction. Liza had run right past – was she *sprinting*? But all the other runners offered a word of encouragement or a fist pump in the air as they passed.

Los Angeles air, especially in the asphalt-covered parking lot, was tough to breathe and Darcy felt like his lungs were coated with smog by the time he hit the halfway point in the run and turned around. On the back half of his run, the only people he passed were two chubby guys in their forties. One wore a t-shirt that was clearly five sizes too big, but both were sweating profusely, even though this was technically just the warm-up.

Darcy trudged back into the box with less than a minute before the actual workout was scheduled to start. Mentally, he started flogging himself again. He should have spaced these workouts out. He shouldn't have tried to find Liza Bennet. He should have never come to Los Angeles at all.

He should have run faster so he had more time to breathe before the workout started.

Before he could even begin to recover, the coach shouted out "3...2...1...go!" and the buzzer sounded.

Darcy stepped up to his kettlebells, breathing heavy but steadily, trying to get his heartrate under control before he started.

Liza caught his eye and smirked. She was moving through her thrusters smoothly, as if she hadn't just run a half-mile in the sun. Her hair was barely out of place and she had only the slightest sheen of sweat on her face. That was when he noticed that she was using the men's weight.

Oh hell.

He wasn't going to look like a wimp in front of her.

He picked up his kettlebells and started the movement. Squat, stand, extend, drop. Squat, stand, extend, drop. Squat, stand, extend, drop. Over and over again, his chest constricting tighter with each repetition. When he had done fifteen, he dropped the kettlebells and started on the burpees. After fifteen of those, he stood up to catch his breath and see how Liza was handling it.

She was just setting down her kettlebells – she had finished the double-unders *and* the second round of kettlebells already? Damn. – and was moving on to her next round of burpees. As far as Darcy could tell, she was way out in front of everyone, and she barely looked tired. Flushed and sweating, yes, but focused and efficient, rather than panting and delirious and exhausted, as he already felt.

Darcy hadn't mastered double-unders yet, considering he had been doing CrossFit for four days so far, so he had to

jump rope for twice as many repetitions to make up the difference in the difficulty.

His second round was considerably slower, and he avoided looking at Liza again as he started his third round. His vision was narrowing and he was forced to block out everything that wasn't right in front of his own face. Which, today, was often the ground beneath him. Grunting like an animal, he pushed himself up off the ground for yet another burpee – who the hell had invented these things? – and moved on to more jumping rope.

God. He hated jumping rope. Had he always hated jumping rope?

He couldn't remember.

Couldn't remember anything but this pain, this exhaustion. His lungs were fire, his muscles screaming at him to slow down, to rest.

But Liza was watching him, that smirk still on her face. She was also jumping rope – but she was jumping higher and her rope was a blur, so he assumed she was successfully getting the rope beneath her feet twice between each bounce – but watching him as he struggled. He tripped and got tangled in his rope and she broke out into a grin.

As he got himself reset, she started in on yet another round of thrusters, still looking totally in control of her movements, still lifting the men's weight, still moving faster than anyone else in the room.

Darcy snuck a peek at the clock, wondering how many more seconds he had to endure this torture.

Five. More. *Minutes?!*

He was going to die in this CrossFit gym. Box. Whatever the hell they wanted to call it. It was going to be his death.

He blew out another breath, sweat flying from his upper lip as he did so, and picked his kettlebells back up again.

This round was even slower, with Darcy pausing for a full two seconds in between each repetition. His knees felt wobbly and he felt light-headed whenever he put the weights up into the air. When he finally dropped them, he vowed he would never pick them back up again. He would burn through these final minutes as slowly as possible so that he never had to touch those damn kettlebells again in his life.

He was never coming back here.

He was never going to let Liza Bennet see him look like a fool again as long as he lived.

Now that he was done with those blasted kettlebells, he moved on to the burpees. In his mind, the burpees had seemed like a reprieve, but now he was questioning that logic. Burpees were from hell itself. Every part of this workout was from hell itself.

And Liza Bennet was apparently the Queen of Hell, because she was still moving fast and smooth, though Darcy was quick to notice that she stopped and took two deep, careful breaths before starting her double-unders yet again.

Maybe she wasn't invincible.

Darcy tripped through the jump rope portion of the workout, hardly stringing together more than two or three jumps at a time before he fumbled his rope.

Finally, mercifully, the buzzer sounded.

Twenty minutes of his life, gone.

And he was going to die on this rubber mat. On the floor of this open, industrial space. In front of Liza Bennet, who was now standing over him, her hand extended, a grin on her face.

"Not bad, newbie," she said, her chest heaving, sweat glistening all across her skin.

Darcy heaved out a breath and took her offered hand, letting her pull him up off the ground. She clapped him on the back and move on. Darcy went to his gym bag and pulled out a towel to wipe down his face. His hands trembled

on the zipper and he felt like an idiot all over again. Why couldn't he have come here first? So she could see him blow through a workout like a boss, instead of this floppy, tired, jump rope-tripping moron?

"Harder than bodybuilding, eh?" the coach asked, clapping him on the shoulder. Why were CrossFitters so touchy-feely?

"Bodybuilding?" Darcy asked, not sure he understood the reference.

The coach - everyone called him 'Dubya' but Darcy didn't know what his real name was - gestured to Darcy's chest and shoulders. "I mean, I just figured. You obviously work out a lot, but you're a lot more gassed than I would've expected. Usually when guys show up here looking like you do, but can't finish more than three rounds of a workout, they're bodybuilders."

Great. He was being stereotyped by a CrossFit coach, now.

"Yeah," he agreed, not wanting to get into it. "Harder than bodybuilding."

Dubya rubbed his hands together, ready to sell a new membership. "So will we be seeing you again?"

Darcy watched Liza as she talked to a couple of the other athletes, a smile across her face, triumphant in her post-workout glow.

"Maybe," he said. "You know what, yeah. Yeah. I'll be back."

"Great," Dubya said. "Let's get you in the system."

Dubya typed as Darcy answered questions and handed his credit card over once again for a recurring membership fee. Darcy tried to stay engaged, but he was watching Liza. The brightly printed shorts and black sports bra left little to the imagination, as she was as toned and fit as anyone he had ever seen. Most of the rest of the athletes were totally exhausted, several had left quickly when class ended, but Liza was hanging around, drinking what looked

like a recovery shake, and doing some work with resistance bands looped around the pullup bar. She was talking with a very curvy woman with wildly curly hair and olive skin. Darcy thought her name was Charlotte – but he couldn't be sure.

When Dubya handed him his credit card back, that was when Darcy saw the banner. Hanging on the wall, two feet tall, in bright red and white and blue graphics, was Liza Bennet's name with the CrossFit Games logo next to it.

He'd forgotten that she was a competitor, not just a CrossFitter. He was going to stop underestimating her if he was going to keep up with her.



## CHAPTER NINE – LIZA

Liza couldn't help but laugh at Darcy, who looked like he was about to keel over and die after a twenty-minute workout. Big, arrogant man came into her box and acted like he was going to take over the top spot, and then he gassed out on the warm-up and nearly collapsed during the workout itself.

This was the box that had trained her up during her competition years. Two years, right when she was out of college, and the Hunting business was still mostly Catherine's, Liza had supplemented her income with prize money from powerlifting and CrossFit competitions all over southern California. It wasn't a living, but she had been rooming with Jane, and she was making part-time money from Catherine, and it had been enough to keep her afloat. Plus, it had kept her in fighting shape, making her strong enough that Catherine trusted her enough to bring her on full-time and to start handing her the more difficult Hunts.

And here was Darcy, famous Hunter extraordinaire, flopping around and gasping for breath like a trout on land. Served him right for stealing her contract and her kills, and for being kind of a dick about it.

She finished her cool-down band work and rollouts with Charlotte, a friend from her college days, just as he was finishing his paperwork with Coach Wickham – she would *never* call that douchebag 'Dubya' no matter how often he told her to do so – so she 'accidentally' sauntered past Darcy as he was gathering up his stuff.

"See you back here tomorrow, champ?" she asked, throwing him a grin.

He looked up at her, eyes wide. But then something in his expression clamped down, darkening his whole face.

“No,” he said. “Probably not tomorrow.”

She wasn’t sure what to say, she had been so sure he was the ultra-competitive type who would be back here again as fast as he could. Not letting the surprise show on her face – why should she care if she can predict how he’ll react? – she raised one eyebrow at him, as if in a challenge. “Too bad. I was looking forward to kicking your ass again.”

“Yeah, well. Maybe some other time.” He finished zipping his bag and stalked away from her, clicking the keyless entry for a shiny black Maserati parked right out front.

A fucking Maserati? Who *was* this guy?

Stunned, she watched him get into the car. Realizing he could probably see her through the pitch-black tint, even if she couldn’t see him, she schooled her features into one of cheerful boredom and waved as he pulled away.

“Hey, yo, Liza,” came Coach Wickham’s voice from behind Liza. Inwardly groaning, she turned to him.

“Hey,” she responded warily. Wickham was a good enough guy, she supposed, but he was also the absolute epitome of L.A. culture: name-dropping C-list celebrities he partied with, barbed wire tattoo around his bicep, and had headshots of himself framed in his apartment. Which she learned when she hooked up with him during the summer Jane still referred to as “the dumb summer”.

“I’m having a party this weekend.” He stood a little too close for comfort, but Liza held her ground.

“Cool.” Best to see where this was going first, before she committed to anything.

“It’d be dope if you came by.”

Ugh. Dope? “Well, it’s Thanksgiving this weekend—”

“Yeah yeah yeah, but you’re usually here for Thanksgiving, right?”

“Right, but—”

“But come on. It’ll be fun. It’s not gonna be a rager, it’ll be low-key. Classy.” He did that thing guys did with their

hands when they're really trying to sell something: holding both out, palms down, sliding one back and forth like he was scratching records or something.

"I don't know, George—"

"Oh come on, don't call me George." He knocked into her arm with a soft fist, faking a friendship that she didn't really want to continue.

"Sorry." She swallowed. "Dubya. Jane's sister is moving in this weekend and I promised I would help her get unpacked—"

"Great! Bring her along, too. Any friend of Jane's is a friend of mine."

Liza forced a smile and stammered something about seeing what she could do. She *wanted* to tell him that she hadn't said anything about a 'friend' of Jane's, she had said something about her 'sister' and just because someone was moving in didn't mean they'd be fun at a party and hadn't she been telling him how she had plans for the weekend?

Liza called Jane from the car, shouting through her Bluetooth connection while sitting in I-5 traffic.

"And then he told me to bring her!"

"Lydia?" Jane asked.

"Yes, of course, Lydia. Who else would I be talking about?"

"Well, I dunno," Jane said. "It might be a good idea for her to make some friends. You know. Make sure she falls in with people who have jobs and aren't going to give her cocaine the first time they meet."

Liza paused. "You think it's a good idea?"

"Yeah. I mean. My family has never been big on Thanksgiving, and your family is—"

"The worst. I know."

"I was going to say 'difficult' but okay. But now that Lydia is here and we are family, it would be nice for the three of us to spend the weekend together. If we don't have a Hunt

to go out on, then a party would be fun, and it would make Lydia feel more welcome and—”

“Alright. We’ll go, stop listing reasons.” Liza chuckled so Jane wouldn’t think she was mad about it.

“Thanks, Liza. I really do think it’ll be good for Lydia to get to know some of our friends. And people from the box are perfect. They’re all healthy and goal-driven and have real jobs.”

“I already agreed, stop listing reasons!”

“Okay – are you still coming over to help unpack?”

“Ehhhhh...”

Jane sighed. “It’s fine. I understand. She’s not your sister. It’s just that there’s a *lot* of stuff and—”

“Of course I’m coming,” Liza said, feeling instantly guilty. Lydia might not be Liza’s favorite person, but Jane was. And Jane almost never asked for help, so if she was asking, she really needed it, and Liza would do anything for Jane.

“Oh, thank you.” The relief in Jane’s voice was palpable.

Liza almost felt guilty for saying, “Just let me go home and shower and eat first. I’ll be over as soon as I can.”

“Okay. But hurry. I’m worried that she’s going to start throwing out my stuff to make room for hers.”

“It’ll be a fast shower, and I’ll get a burrito on the way over.”

An hour later, Liza was polishing off the last of her burrito as she pulled up in front of Jane’s apartment complex. She cleaned up her mess and tossed the wrappers into the trash can at the gate of the complex. She punched in the code and let herself in, mentally flinching already, imagining Lydia throwing a huge fit somewhere inside or an enormous pile of expensive shit nobody needed or had room for.

When she ascended the clanging metal-and-concrete steps that led to Jane's apartment, she was pleasantly surprised to see a fairly reasonable number of boxes in landing area. A lamp, a rolled-up rug. Not terrible. She allowed herself to feel optimistic before pushing her way into the apartment.

"Whoa," she said once she crossed the threshold.

Lydia's stuff was *everywhere*. Jane's apartment looked like a labyrinth of boxes, luggage, and home décor.

"How did you do this so fast?" Liza called out.

A grunt. Then Jane materialized around a corner, her normally neat hair up in a very messy bun. Liza felt her eyes widen at the sight.

"Apparently," Jane began, drawing the word out in a huff, "Lydia has known for *weeks* that she was being kicked out. Dad warned her forever ago. She had been hoping he would change his mind, or that she would somehow magically come up with the money for rent on her own."

Lydia lying wasn't exactly a shock, but Liza kept that to herself. "Okay, but how did she pack this all up so fast and get it up here?"

Jane gave her a withering look. "She didn't. Louise did. Had professional movers at her door two days ago and told her he didn't care where she went, but she had to be out by today."

"Ohhhhhh..." Liza said, comprehension dawning. If it was their *stepmother* behind all this, it made much more sense. Jane's father was aloof and uninvolved, but he wasn't cruel. He paid part of Jane's rent while she was getting her feet under her, paid for Lydia's school and globe-trotting 'gap years,' the whole bit. But Jane's stepmother, on the other hand, was prone to 'hysterics' as her husband called them, or 'moods' as Jane called them. She changed her mind without warning and subjected everyone in her orbit to her whims, no matter how capricious or selfish they might be. Liza understood now: their father had been warning Lydia to

get her shit together or she'd be on her own, but he never had the guts to follow through. Then, one day, Louise got tired of waiting or tired of paying or whatever, flipped shit and sent movers to kick Lydia out of her apartment.

"That's why Lydia is here, and didn't go home," Liza said. Jane nodded, clearly grateful that she didn't have to explain these family dynamics to her oldest friend. Liza pulled her still-damp hair up into a ponytail. "Put me to work. What needs to be done?"

## CHAPTER TEN – DARCY

Darcy wasn't surprised to see Brett working at headquarters when he arrived. He did his best to appear appropriately tired after a difficult workout, but his knees felt wobbly he wasn't sure he was going to make it up the stairs without falling. No mistake about it: he had pushed himself too far, and Liza had laughed at him for it. Was probably still laughing.

What a humiliating day.

"The mayor sends his congratulations," Brett called out as Darcy tried to slip by unnoticed. "He released a press state—what the hell happened to you?"

Darcy winced and turned, slowly, to face Brett.

"Shit, you look awful. Are you sick?"

"No, just tired." He felt like he was going to pass out.

Brett's brows furrowed. "You look like you're going to throw up."

Or that. Darcy leaned against the wall, the plastered drywall cool on his skin. He resisted the urge to rest his forehead against it. "Nah, I'm pretty sure the window for throwing up has passed already."

"What?"

Darcy waved him off. "Hit it too hard at the gym, it's no big deal."

Now Brett's eyes narrowed and he turned to face Darcy fully instead of looking over his shoulder. "Too hard? At the gym? You? I didn't think that was possible. I've worked out with Giana, and I've tried to keep up with you, and it's just not possible."

"Well, it turns out it *is* possible to not only keep up with me, but to kick my ass, too."

"Giana?" Brett asked, a small smirk on his face.

Darcy shook his head. "CrossFit."

"Oof. You are gonna wish it was Giana when she finds out you did CrossFit behind her back."

Darcy sighed and nodded. His baby sister was going to see this as a betrayal of the highest order, Brett was right about that.

"So why did you do it? Just curious? Or are you trying to piss her off right before she comes over for Thanksgiving tomorrow?"

Darcy winced again. He felt so stupid - again - for trying to find Liza's CrossFit box and 'accidentally' run into her.

"What aren't you telling me?" Brett asked. He had turned away from his work long enough that his screen had darkened behind him and he was watching Darcy's face intently.

Darcy took a deep breath and told Brett what he'd been doing.

When he was finished, Brett stared at him for a long time.

"Say something," Darcy finally said.

"You're telling me that you've been nearly killing yourself by doing double CrossFit workouts all week in the hopes that you'll run into the lady vampire Hunter who yelled at you in an alley a couple times?"

"Ah, yeah." It sounded so, so, so stupid.

"Did she at least agree to go out with you?"

"What? No! That's not... that isn't at all... I didn't ask her out!"

Brett paused for a very long time before asking, "Why the hell not?"

"I mean, that is completely preposterous, totally beside the point—"

"Beside the point." Brett sounded like he was trying very hard not to laugh.

"Yes."



“Alright then, what was ‘the point’ of doing all this?”

Darcy spluttered. He stammered something about research and market variables and competitors— “And if other Hunters in L.A. are into CrossFitting, then maybe I should be, too,” he finally declared triumphantly. There. He’d saved face. He’d come up with a perfectly respectable reason for him to—

“Bullshit,” Brett laughed. “What utter, complete, and total bullshit. You like this woman, and you were hoping to run into her and impress her and now you’re kicking yourself for not asking her out when you had the chance.”

Darcy ground his teeth together.

“Does she have a boyfriend? Is that why you didn’t ask her out?” Brett had stopped laughing and was sounding sympathetic now, which somehow made Darcy feel even worse.

“No. I mean... I don’t actually know.”

“But you didn’t see her with someone? A guy, or a girl?”

“No.”

“Alright, so still a chance she’s single.”

“We’re all single,” Darcy said, referring to Hunters in general. Hazard of the night shift and blood-soaked hands and all that.

“Alright, so what’s the problem?”

Darcy looked at his shoes. He couldn’t say it.

“Darcy?”

Darcy heaved a deep sigh, closed his eyes, and let it all out in a rush: “SheKickedMyAssInTheWorkoutSoBadThatIWasTooEmbarrassedToEvenTalkToHer.”

Brett took a second to digest that. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Yikes.”

“So you think I should have been embarrassed?”

“No, actually,” Brett said matter-of-factly. Darcy let his shoulders drop in relief. If Brett didn’t think he needed to be embarrassed—

“I mean, now you should be embarrassed of yourself. Now that you acted like a baby over her beating you in a workout.”

“What?”

“Losing to her in a workout – in a sport that she was a *professional competitor* in – isn’t embarrassing. It’s to be expected. Of course she kicked your ass. You can walk away from that with your head held high, that’s not a problem. But now that you acted like a baby over it? Slunk away with your tail between your legs? That *is* a problem. Now she’ll think you’re too intimidated by a strong woman, and that’s tough to come back from.”

“That’s ridiculous! I’m not intimidated by a strong woman—”

“I know,” Brett said, putting his hands out in a placating gesture. “But I’m just telling you what it looks like from her point of view. If you want another chance, you’re gonna have to eat some humble pie, my friend.”

“Shut up,” Darcy said as he headed for the stairs.

“Giana will be here at noon tomorrow!” Brett called after Darcy, who headed straight for the shower to drown his humiliation and self-loathing.

Giana arrived just before noon, as promised, bearing a bottle of wine and a sugar-free pumpkin pie.

“I can’t believe you’ve been in L.A. for almost a month and this is the first time I’ve been to your place!” she exclaimed after hugging Darcy.

“Hi Giana,” Brett said, also hugging her.

“Oh, it’s good to see you, Brett.”

“Likewise,” he said, putting his hands out to take her food. “I’ll take that from you.”

“Oh, thanks!”

Brett brought the food upstairs to the kitchen, leaving Darcy to show Giana around their headquarters space.

"It looks like things are going well?" she asked after she'd taken a brief look at the workspace and they started heading upstairs.

"Well enough," Darcy responded. "I'm hoping this will be my last contract."

"Then you can go full hermit in the woods, eh?"

"That's the dream."

Darcy's legs still felt like jelly, so he moved slowly, trying to hide it from Giana.

"What's wrong with you?" Giana asked from behind him as they entered Brett's condo. "You look like you've got an actual stick up your ass."

Busted.

"Oh it's nothing, I just—"

"He went to five CrossFit classes in five days, trying to find a girl he liked," Brett called from his kitchen, his voice bouncing off all the stainless steel. Darcy's

"Traitor," Darcy muttered.

"CrossFit?" Giana asked, aghast. "You went to CrossFit instead of coming to my studio? I've been training you over Zoom for how long, and now you pay an ass-load of money for someone to tell you to cycle a barbell faster?"

"Did you not hear the part about it being for a girl?" Brett asked incredulously. He was stirring something that smelled herbaceous.

Giana's eyes narrowed. "Is she worth losing your sister over?"

Darcy rolled his eyes. "You can't get rid of me that easily. And, no. It was not worth it."

"That's only because you chickened out," Brett said.

"Do you mind?" Darcy asked him. Brett shrugged.

"What do you mean, he 'chickened out'?" Giana asked.

"Nothing," Darcy said quickly.

Brett scoffed. "I mean exactly that. After the class was over, he packed up and left without talking to her."

Giana looked at Darcy like he was crazy. "You go through all that for nothing?"

"He's embarrassed because she kicked his ass in the workout."

Giana punched her older brother in the arm for that.

"Hey!" Darcy rubbed at the spot. Damn Giana was strong. "It's not just that - if I had been at my best, and she had beaten me fair and square, that's fine. You kick my ass all the time."

"Damn straight I do," Giana said, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Right, see? I'm not a total asshole. I just..."

"Just what?"

Darcy sighed. "I just feel stupid." He had been saying that word to himself a lot lately. "If I hadn't been trying to so hard to see her, to impress her, I might have been able to hang. Not look so dumb. It's my own fault, and I guess I'm angry at myself for being so fucking stupid."

"How do you even know this woman?" Giana asked, taking an appetizer from the tray Brett had set out. Considering it was only the three of them, Brett was going to an awful lot of trouble.

"She's another Hunter," Darcy said, avoiding Giana's eyes.

"Oh ho!" she exclaimed, grinning at him and then exchanging a meaningful look with Brett. "So this is competitive thing, on like, every level? She's a Hunter and you need to prove that you're a better Hunter, and then when you heard she does CrossFit you needed to prove that you're better at CrossFit, even though you've never done it before. Man. You never change, do you?"

Darcy bit his tongue. Was it better to let his sister think this was a childish arrogance? Or should he come

clean about his growing interest in Liza as an actual person? And possibly a ... dare he think it ... partner?

"If I had known, I would've stopped him," Brett said over his shoulder. He was doing something fussy with the little turkey he had roasted, making it far too fancy for the circumstances.

Definitely better to let them both think this was arrogance. They wouldn't believe him anyway, if he insisted he had changed and was being a pathetic puppy, following a woman around, hoping she'd notice him and give him a treat.

"Maybe she'll be at the party this weekend!" Brett said. "Dinner is ready, let's take this all to the table."

They all helped to move too many dishes to the table in the open-concept dining area and sat down to eat.

"What party?" Giana asked.

"It's nothing," Darcy said at the same time Brett said, "A party with a bunch of people from her gym."

"A party with gym people?" Giana lifted her eyebrows at her older brother.

"Ugh. Not you too," Darcy said, serving himself some brussels sprouts and then passing the dish to Brett.

"Let me guess," Giana said, turning to Brett, "You want to go, but he doesn't. He's the one who got invited, so you've got to convince him to go so you don't feel rude showing up."

"Bingo." Brett shook his head sadly. "I follow this sad-sack from city to city and then have to twist his arm to ever leave his apartment if it isn't for a Hunt. He'd be happy to hide inside and make no friends and live with his books and his crossword puzzles."

"I'll get him to go," Giana said confidently.

"No you won't," Darcy contradicted, knowing full well that by the end of the night she would be right and he would be wrong. Again.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN – LIZA

Lydia had an awful lot of shit to get moved into Jane's tiny two-bedroom apartment (well, really, it was one bedroom and a den, but Lydia would have to deal with the weird double-doors and an awkward space for now), but Liza was impressed that they managed to get it all done in a day. Then it took another half of a day to get things settled: boxes crushed and removed, décor hung on the walls, keys made, and all the other little things that go into a move.

By the time Thanksgiving dinner time rolled around, everyone was too exhausted to cook anything, which was a damn shame because Jane was one hell of a cook. Luckily, living in L.A. meant that all the tourist destinations were open on holidays, and an awful lot of people didn't know how to cook, so takeout was easier to come by here than it would be somewhere else.

In the end, Liza, Jane, and Lydia wound up ordering Thai food from a kitschy place with a pun for a name and enjoying every bit of it.

"So I guess you can start working on Monday," Liza said, deliberately avoiding Lydia's eyeline. She knew how this conversation was going to go, but she also knew Jane wouldn't bring it up at all. Sure enough, she got a kick to the shins as soon as she asked the question.

"Monday?" Lydia asked. "Working? I don't have a job."

Liza looked her in the eye now. Her Instagram-worthy brows were arched in feigned confusion, her collagen-filled lips turned down in a frown.

"It was one of the conditions of you moving in here, if I recall correctly," Liza said. She turned to Jane for confirmation, but Jane was burying her face in pad thai, focusing on her chopstick technique far more than was

necessary. "You originally asked us for a job, and the place to live was secondary."

"Oh, you're not actually going to make me do that, are you, Jane?" Lydia's voice pitched up in a whine and she turned her frown into a full-on pout. She turned the pout on Jane, knowing who was the weaker target in the room.

Jane made a non-committal kind of humming sound and refused to look up.

"I'd be awful at it, Jane," Lydia continued. Her voice was full of a forced whine, and she leaned hard on the end of Jane's name. "I freak the fuck out even when I get just a papercut, I can't handle stabbing a vampire in the heart or whatever it is they carry around in their undead chests!"

"Relax," Liza said, rolling her eyes. At least the over-exaggerated whining made a little more sense. "We were expecting you to take over our web presence. Redesign the website, manage social media, handle some press releases. Stuff like that."

"Oh." Lydia brightened considerably. "I can totally do that. But Monday might not be good for me. I'm new in town and I want to make sure I go out and make some friends, and that usually means Monday is for hangovers..." she said the last word in a sing-song voice that made Liza want to punch her.

"You'll start Monday," Liza said firmly. "And we'll take you to meet some people tomorrow night. No Monday hangover needed."

Lydia hesitated. "You're... taking me to ... meet people?" She squinted at Liza. "Are they... like you?"

"Do you mean, 'are they real adults'?" She paused, then dug back into her food, shrugging. "No, not really."

"Oh, okay. Then I'm in!"

Liza rolled her eyes once more but decided not to deal with this right now. Jane had wanted Lydia to go to this party, and Liza would do just about anything for Jane.

Dubya's townhouse was unexpectedly nice for a gym coach's salary; his acting gigs must be paying better than Liza expected, for him to be able to afford to live in a place like this. In a gated subdivision, with a gorgeous pool and community clubhouse, George "Dubya" Wickham was living in comfort in a way Liza could only hope for.

Once again, she questioned her job choice. Or Jane's method of financing the operation. Something. What were they doing wrong that they were both competent women in their thirties, still living in mediocre apartments and struggling to win contracts that they fully deserved?

"This isn't about you," Jane hissed in her ear. Liza scowled. Her friend knew her too well, to know what she had been thinking as they walked in, their high heels clacking on travertine floors in George's entryway.

Loud music thumped from the patio and Jane led the way through the well-decorated house. Liza marveled as they walked through the small but luxurious space; who knew that George was living like this? That he was ... classy? The couple of times she had hooked up with him had been at her place and she suddenly resented him for eating her food from her barely-stocked fridge and using her hot water when he was obviously doing better than she was.

Why couldn't she hook up with a guy who wanted to act like an adult, rather than taking advantage of the woman he was having sex with? It was a petulant thought, and she kind of hated herself for it; but the fact remained that a gym coach was living more comfortably than a vampire Hunter who provided an actual service to society. Instead of hating herself, she decided to hate him.

The patio was alongside a large, shared space with the other townhouses in this section of the subdivision all opening up into the same greenbelt. Pergolas covered in twinkle lights dotted the greenbelt, with flagstone pathways connecting each back patio to the center of the shared space. A badminton net had been set up near one of the



other homes, and there was evidence of kids' play scattered near some of the other patios.

Liza's heels wobbled on the flagstones, but it was better than sinking into the grass, which did look thick and luxuriously soft. The evening was cooler than Liza would have preferred, particularly in party clothes, but L.A. could certainly do a lot worse in late November, so she decided not to complain about it.

A few dozen people stood around the pergolas, the twinkle lights providing enough lighting for a party but not enough to see clearly from a distance. Coolers filled with ice and bottled beer were lined up in front of a banquet-style table laden with healthy-ish snack food. Music came from some hidden speakers, installed all around the space.

Liza and Jane exchanged a look and dived into the fray. Lydia had already disappeared.

After only a few minutes, Liza and Jane were separated, too. The few dozen people had steadily grown into quite a crowd, and Liza worried that the homeowners' association or the police or somebody would shut this down soon.

No sign of Lydia anywhere, but there was also no sign of George, which Liza took to be a good thing. Liza found herself next to a propane space heater and decided this was where she would spend the rest of the evening. She spotted Jane, sitting on the retaining wall around a large shade tree, laughing and talking with a super-hot guy. At least, Liza assumed he was super-hot. He was fit and clean-shaven, just Jane's type. Thick-rimmed glasses glinted in the twinkle lights, and he was dressed well. A real grown-up. And if Jane liked him, then Liza would surely approve.

"Oof, you're smart," a female voice said. Liza turned to see a pretty girl several years younger than her rubbing her hands together and trying to cozy up to the space heater. "I stupidly thought this would be an indoor thing, so..." she gestured at her outfit.

Liza laughed. The girl was wearing a slinky dress that showed off a body she had clearly worked very hard on. It had elbow-length sleeves, but not a lot of bulk to it, and her legs were bare beneath the very short skirt. Those knee-high boots weren't enough to ward off the late autumn chill.

"I should have been a boy scout," Liza said back, gesturing to her dressy black swing coat, light scarf, and ultra-tight jeans.

"Always prepared," the girl said and laughed. "I like it. I'm Giana."

"Liza. So how do you know Dubya?"

Giana took a sip of her beer and shook her head. "I don't, actually. I'm just here with my brother and his roommate." She scanned the area, and then pointed to where Jane was sitting with the super-hot guy. "That's the roommate. I don't see my brother, though. Knowing him, he's probably inside reading something."

Liza chuckled but secretly wished she was inside reading something, too. Could she manage to sneak away?

"Tell me about the roommate," Liza said. "That's my best friend he's talking to."

"Oh, he's so great," Giana said and Liza's heart relaxed. "He's smart and sweet and just a genuinely good guy."

"Not a douchebag?"

"Definitely not. Not even a little."

"Oh good. If you meet Dubya, *he's* a douchebag, so watch out."

"Noted," Giana said. "I'm not really here to meet anybody anyway. Just got burned recently, so I'm taking a bit of a dating break."

"Don't have to be dating to hook up with somebody," Liza said.

"Are you hitting on me?" Giana said lightly.

Liza chuckled again. She liked this girl, but not like that. "No, sadly, though you do seem great. I can't convince

myself to not love a good dick-down."

"It's a shame, isn't it."

"A crying shame." They clinked the necks of their beer bottles and smiled. "So what do you do, Giana-who-isn't-looking-to-get-laid-tonight?"

"I'm a personal trainer."

"Ah, that explains the fantastic legs."

"It does indeed." Giana looked down at her own extended leg. Liza was impressed with how unashamed this woman was of her own hard work. "What about you?"

"A Hunter, actually."

Giana's eyes went wide. "A *vampire* Hunter?"

"Yep." Liza's chest warmed. She had fantastic legs, too, but she was more than just a fabulous body and she would be lying if she said she didn't enjoy the way people saw Hunters as something to be revered.

"You should meet my brother," Giana said. "He's a Hunter, too."

"Really?" Liza was taken aback. "What's his name? There aren't a lot of us, it's a pretty small community."

Giana waved her hand. "Oh, he's new in town, you probably haven't had a chance to meet him yet."

Liza's good mood sank. "He's new in town?" Her voice sounded hollow to her own ears.

"Yeah, got here less than a month ago."

Oh no.

"Actually," Giana said, pulling on Liza's elbow, dragging her closer and pointing into the distance. "That's him there."

Liza followed the line of Giana's arm and sure enough, there was Darcy the dickhead from Nether Fields. The Hunter who had stolen her contract and ruined her Hunt and showed up at her gym, thinking he could own the place.

## CHAPTER TWELVE – DARCY

Darcy spotted Giana standing next to a space heater. He pushed his way through the crowd, hoping to convince her to leave this stupid party sooner rather than later. When he finally arrived at her side, he pulled up short.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey, yourself,” Giana said.

Darcy didn’t look at her. He couldn’t.

Standing right next to his baby sister, wearing something with a plunging neckline, highlighted by the bright scarf draped above her cleavage, was Liza Bennet.

Liza’s eyes bored into his, angry fire in them.

Darcy squared his shoulders. He had let this woman get the best of him twice already – once with an olive in her teeth and once at a gym – and he wasn’t going to look like an idiot in front of her again.

“Enjoying your night?” he asked Liza. He didn’t know what to do with his hands. Pockets? Behind his back? They felt like they were just hanging at his sides like slabs of meat. What did he normally do with his hands?

“It was better before you showed up,” she shot back.

“Whoa,” Giana said, her eyes swiveling back and forth between Darcy and Liza. Darcy took a long, slow swig of his beer and suddenly wished he had something stronger. He had been seeking this woman out for days, but now that he was face-to-face with her and he saw the hate written all over her face, he wasn’t entirely sure what he had been thinking. Giana laughed awkwardly and said, “I assume you two have met already?”

“I kicked his ass at the gym the other day,” Liza said, putting on an obviously fake saccharine smile and batting her eyelashes.

“Ohhhh...” Giana said, comprehension dawning. “So this—”

“That was *after* I kicked your ass on a Hunt last week.”

Liza’s fake grin disappeared back into her resting bitch face and Darcy felt an unspoken challenge.

“After you *stole* my contract, you mean?”

“I didn’t *steal* anything,” Darcy countered. He stepped closer to her. She was tall, and she was wearing heels, so they stood at almost identical heights. If he took one more step, they’d be completely nose-to-nose. “Brett negotiated that contract for weeks before we moved here.”

The flint in her eyes hardened. “You knew you had it before you got here?”

“Of course,” he scoffed. “I wouldn’t have moved here if I didn’t have a job already lined up. Besides, why do you care so much? It’s not like you aren’t doing just fine for yourself anyway.”

Her nostrils flared and she took a deep breath. He rocked back on his heels, ready for the argument. When she spoke again, he wasn’t disappointed.

“I am doing better than ‘just fine’, fuck you very much. I have been the top Hunter in the county for nearly a decade. I took over for Catherine DeBourgh. Maybe you’ve heard of her?”

He had. Everyone in the business had heard of her. First female Hunter anywhere in the U.S., holding her own in an all-male industry all the way back to the 70s.

Liza’s smirk grew. “I thought so. I learned *everything* from her.”

“Not everything,” he said with a calm in his voice that he didn’t really feel anywhere else.

“What is that supposed to mean?” She leaned forward, definitely challenging his personal space. He held his ground, felt the slightest brush of her breasts against his chest before she shifted slightly.

"It means that you're still using stationary stakes, no projectiles. If you'd had the right tools, maybe I wouldn't have taken your Hunt from you."

"Oh," she said with a shit-eating grin, "I think I've got more than enough *tools* in my life. Thanks anyway."

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?" he shot back at her.

"It means that I don't need you, and you're a tool."

"A tool?" He scoffed, looking to Giana for support. When had Giana disappeared? He turned back to Liza. "What are you, in seventh grade?"

"Nice retort, tool."

"I don't need this," Darcy growled, but he didn't back away. She was still standing right up against him, the fire in her eyes sparkling under the twinkle lights. Her scent was stronger than the fresh-cut grass around them, soap and leather. His eyes flicked to her lips, full and red.

He remembered the olive stunt she had pulled and he felt the blood creep up his cheeks. And... to some other places, too.

"*You* don't need this?" Liza seethed, but some of the anger seemed to have fizzled out a bit. Her eyes dropped to his lips, too, and he had an overwhelming urge to close the last few inches between them before she went on. "*I* don't need this. I was doing fine without you here. I deserved that city contract. Do you have any idea how hard I have worked?"

The words flew out of his mouth before he could stop them - "Apparently not hard enough."

She gasped, but still didn't step away from him.

She clamped her lips together, breathing heavy through her nose, clearly upset.

And then she kissed him.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN – LIZA

Liza didn't remember deciding to kiss Darcy the dickhead, but maybe too many beers or too many arguments or too many skipped dates in favor of Hunting had gotten the best of her and she yanked at Darcy's lapels and pulled him into a kiss. Hard.

God, he smelled good. Tasted good.

He wasted no time, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her body against his. She pressed against the length of his body, against the hard and unyielding muscle that made up a successful vampire Hunter.

His lips parted and she took the opportunity, sweeping her tongue into his mouth. He growled against her lips and deepened the kiss even further.

She broke the kiss and pulled back just slightly, breathing hard. His stubble had scratched at her chin and the burn on her face felt so good.

"How did that—" he breathed.

"Don't ask stupid questions," she said, pushing him away from the space heater, away from the crowd, the short distance to the back wall of Coach Dubya's townhouse. As his back hit the wall, she pressed against him once again and pulled his face down for another kiss.

He responded enthusiastically, his hands finding the skin of her lower back, working their way under her shirt. His lips moved against hers, opening for her tongue to find its way in.

Liza pulled on his shirt then wound her hands up into his hair – god, his hair was soft. She twined her fingers through it, scraping her fingernails against his scalp.

Darcy moaned against her mouth and dropped a hand to her ass, cupping and pulling her even closer to him.

“Yo, get a room,” came a voice from behind her, followed by multiple voices laughing.

She broke the kiss again and looked into Darcy’s eyes. Dazed with lust, his eyes never left her lips as he breathed heavily, his hand still on her ass.

“The guest room,” she breathed. She yanked on his shirt, pulling him after her. “Come on.”

Through the sliding back door and the brightly lit kitchen, Liza pulled Darcy quickly through, afraid that if she stopped to think, she would talk herself out of this.

Around the corner into an unlit hallway and up the stairs. First door on the left, she threw the door open and found an empty bedroom.

“How do you know your way around—” Darcy started.

“Didn’t I tell you not to ask stupid questions?”

Liza locked the door and then shoved Darcy against it, pressing herself against his chest once more.

His hands found her ass and hitched one of her legs up, his hand running from her ass to her thigh and back again.

All the while, she kissed him. Deep and hard, her tongue exploring his lips, his mouth, the taste of him. She ground her hips into his, letting the heat roll through her, drive her, compel her.

His other hand – the one not squeezing her ass – went up the back of her shirt, sending goosebumps across her skin. He hardened against her and desire flooded through her at the thought of his cock pressed against her inner thigh.

She broke the kiss and looked into his eyes, running her tongue across her lips, her teeth, watching his eyes try to focus on her. Try – and fail.

With a lift of one eyebrow, she held his gaze steadily and slowly lowered herself to her knees. She let her hands drag down his body, her palms pressing against his muscled chest as they found their way down to his belt.



Still maintaining eye contact, and now biting her lower lip, Liza loosened his belt. Darcy shifted his weight, spreading his legs farther apart, bracing himself against the door.

He let out a shaky breath as she lowered his jeans and boxer briefs to mid-thigh, letting his impressive cock spring free.

Liza blinked slowly and deliberately, just once, then turned her attention to his cock. Clean-shaven downstairs to make up for the stubble on his face.

Liza ran her tongue along the underside of Darcy's impressively large cock, base to tip, feeling him pulse with anticipation. Massaging his balls, she ran her tongue around his tip, tasting his precum, before she dived in for real.

Darcy groaned as she wrapped her mouth around his cock and began sliding up and down, using her tongue to put pressure on the underside. Something bumped against the door; Liza didn't know if it was Darcy's head or his fist, but he groaned again.

One hand on his balls, the other working his shaft, Liza sucked and pumped, focusing especially on the tip.

"Oh god," he moaned, "Oh god, yes, just like that."

He hissed in through his teeth and Liza looked up at him.

When she made eye contact, he reached down and pulled her up, kissing her deeply once more. Darcy pushed away from the door, pulling at her clothes as he guided her farther into the room.

Jacket and blouse, gone.

Liza took the chance to divest him of his jacket and shirt, too, letting out a grunt of desire at the sight of his chest. Her knees hit the edge of the bed – a full-size without any superfluous pillows – and Darcy stopped the advance.

His hand went to her breast, massaging as he kissed her. He folded down the cup of her bra, tucking it under her breast, exposing her nipple. He did the same to the other,

then guided her down onto the bed, lowering himself on top of her. His right hand didn't leave her tit, pinching and playing with her nipple, his mouth on hers, kissing her deeply.

Once she was settled on the bed, Darcy lowered his mouth to her tits, sucking first on one, then on the other, his hand picking up where his mouth left off whenever he changed.

Liza arched against him, eyes closing involuntarily. She wrapped her legs around his waist, rocking his hips down into hers.

Darcy leaned upward, breaking their contact. He knocked her high heels off easily, each of them thudding to the floor unceremoniously. Her scent filled the space between them.

With a glint in his eye, he scooted back, dropping to his knees at the side of the bed. Her jeans were tighter than his, but he managed to slide them down over her thighs, taking her panties with them, dropping it all on the floor with her shoes and most of his clothes.

She parted her legs for him and leaned her head back.

He kissed his way up her right thigh, nipping occasionally with his teeth, until he reached her pussy. He licked her lightly, parting her lips enough for her to feel the ache of desire, before he moved on to her other thigh. Kissing and nipping, he was driving her mad.

Liza reached down and tangled her fingers in his hair, tugging gently.

He chuckled, a low rumble between her legs that made her quiver, but he took the hint.

Sliding his tongue between her pussy lips, sliding upward, he finally made contact with her clit. Gently at first, he massaged her clit with his tongue, burying his face in her mound. Liza moaned and arched her back, grinding her hips down into the mattress.

Darcy took that as his cue to ramp it up, and Liza felt one of his fingers enter her.

She moaned wordlessly again, grinding against his hand until he pulled out, then plunged back in with two fingers this time. All the while, his mouth kept working her clit, sucking and massaging. Fingers pumping inside her, stroking that spot inside her that made her toes curl.

Liza kept her fingers in Darcy's hair, tangled up, pressing his face into her pussy, grinding harder and harder.

Her orgasm came on suddenly and she clenched her hands in Darcy's hair.

"Oh, god, don't stop," she breathed. She picked her head up, looking him in the eyes as he made her cum all over his face, pleasure shuddering through her, leaving her feeling weightless when she flopped back onto the mattress.

Darcy's tongue slowed, tracing lazy circles around her clit, up and down her lips, kissing her occasionally. Liza shuddered and sighed, letting the post-orgasm calm settle over her. She heard a condom wrapper open and opened her eyes to see Darcy standing before her, naked and glorious.

"I hope you're ready for round two," he said, his voice gravelly.

She smiled at him and pushed herself farther up on the bed, making room for him. Once the condom was on, he climbed on top of her, trailing kisses up her torso, blazing a trail of heat with his lips. He stopped at her breasts, sucking on her right nipple, playing with the left with his hand.

Liza reached down and guided his rock-hard cock into her pussy.

Darcy held his weight up on his elbows and looked into her eyes, letting her adjust to his girth. When she nodded, he slid slowly the rest of the way into her, burying himself completely inside her. Liza let out a sigh and rolled her hips up to meet his thrust.

She let her hands find their way to his back, to the hardened muscles flexing as he thrust inside of her. He

lowered himself just enough to reach her neck with his mouth, kissing the soft spot just behind her ear, licking the hollow beneath her jaw as he rocked into her again and again.

Liza felt another orgasm building as Darcy increased his speed. Long, deliberate strokes pounding into her. Liza clamped down on him, increasing the pressure, rocking her hips in tandem with his motions.

As Liza's second orgasm crested, Darcy growled against her ear. His thrusting sped up once again, pumping in time with the waves of her pleasure until he finally shuddered and sighed, his breath cooling the sweat at the hollow of her throat.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN – DARCY

Getting dressed, Darcy exhaled heavily. Nerves jangled in his gut, but he wanted to be honest with Liza. He didn't want a fling – he wasn't good at them. She deserved to know that he hadn't 'accidentally' run into her at the gym, and he was glad he had run into her tonight. "I didn't come here planning to do this," he said. "I've been trying—"

"Nobody ever plans these things," Liza said flippantly, pulling on her skin-tight jeans, not looking at him. "It's good to just get it out of your system, though, right? Now we can just back to hating each other."

Darcy froze, his shirt half-buttoned. She hated him? He knew he had made a poor first impression, but... hate? He thought back to the gym, to the day she had beat him so badly in the workout and then teased him afterward. Had he imagined the flirty tone? Or just hoped for it? Heat flooded up his face as he realized that she really had been taunting him, jeering at him. He was the one who had projected a flirtation onto the interaction. Ever since she learned that he had the contract, she'd hated him. The stunt with the olive at the mayor's party was the last chance he'd ever had to have something real with her.

What an utter and complete fool he was making of himself.

He cleared his throat and hurried getting dressed.

"Alright, then, yeah, I guess." Where the hell had his socks gone to?

"I'm not usually this girl," Liza continued, her voice light, airy. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, slipping on her shoes. "But something about you just brings out the worst in me, and I just had to... I don't know, like I said, get it out of my system."

She stood, once again nose-to-nose with Darcy. He kept his shoulders back, his chin up, swallowing the words he had been planning to say. *I've been trying to find a way to talk to you, to see if there was something I could do to make everything up to you.*

"You're better than I thought you'd be, I'll admit," she said, adjusting her jacket, her shirt, anything she could smooth or straighten. "Guys like you are usually just take, take, take. You can dish it out better than... well, than anybody." She smiled and gave a half-shrug.

"Thanks?"

"Oh no," she said, leaning in close. Her breath tickled his ear and her next words were a purr: "Thank *you*."

Darcy shivered and cursed his body for reacting to her so quickly once again.

"Text you later," she said as she breezed out of the room. He hadn't given her his number, and his face continued to burn at the shame of this.

Then she was gone and he was alone, barefoot, in the guest bedroom of some random CrossFit coach's house, his business partner and his sister at the party outside.

Once Liza was truly gone – Darcy checked the hall to be sure she wasn't in the bathroom or lingering outside the door – he flipped the light on and got down on the ground, searching for those goddamn socks. The bedroom was nearly bare, a few random posters hung on the wall. Posters. Like this room belonged to a college kid.

Sickness grew in Darcy's gut.

He'd been attracted to this woman for weeks, had gone to ludicrous lengths to spend some time with her, get to know her, and he'd ended up hooking up with her in some generic frat boy bedroom with nothing but a ceiling fan for lighting. She was gone, but not before telling him she hated him and planned to carry on hating him, and he was on his hands and knees searching for his socks.

God. What an idiot he was.

He got the stupid socks on, and his shoes, belt, jacket, all of it. Every piece of clothing felt like another piece of his dignity being haphazardly shoved into place. He tried adjusting his belt, but it felt like it was hanging wrong. His jacket suddenly seemed incapable of settling on his shoulders, and the back of his shirt insisted on bunching between his shoulder blades.

Shrugging and shifting his weight, he left the depressing guest room behind, sure that everyone who saw him would be able to tell that his clothes no longer fit quite right. Nothing went back on the way it was supposed to, shining a light on his walk of shame. *Everybody look over here! Darcy tried to start something real and instead got laid out of revenge!*

Outside, the music was too loud, the twinkle lights tacky. The festive atmosphere was quickly turning sloppy, the laughter too raucous. The cops were going to be called soon, Darcy was sure of it. This neighborhood was too nice, the grass too soft and thick and green for the neighbors to put up with this for long. He looked at the clock on his phone – 11:15. If it wasn't broken up by midnight, he'd be shocked.

He looked for Brett or Giana. He'd prefer to leave with them, but he'd get an Uber if he had to.

Brett was easy to find, it turned out. He was still sitting on the wall around the big shade tree, the pretty brunette still smiling at him dazedly. They sat, thighs touching, both of them with stars in their eyes.

Alright, then. Giana. Darcy could always count on his sister to be a buzzkill when necessary. She'd leave with him.

He skirted the bulk of the crowd, hoping he wouldn't run into Liza, at the very least.

Arriving back at the backdoor to the house, Darcy ducked inside with the goal of making it out the front door. He'd be able to breathe once he wasn't surrounded by the party. On his way, he texted Brett, just in case.

*I'm ready to leave – you staying?*

He didn't expect a response, and none came. Darcy exhaled heavily through his nose, grinding his teeth together.

Reaching the cool, fresh air of the front stoop, he was about to text Giana, when he heard her voice instead.

"Oh thank god," she said. "Let's get out of here."

He looked up to see her sitting on the curb, her arms around her knees.

"Hey, yeah, let's get out of here. What happened to you?"

"Ugh, you'll never believe." He reached down a hand and helped pull her up; she didn't need the help, it was just a nice thing to do. She accepted the help and then shimmied and shook the dust and dirt off the butt of her skirt.

"Try me," he said, knowing he had a pretty unbelievable story, too.

"This house?" She jerked a thumb over her shoulder as they walked away toward the car. "Belongs to George."

Darcy stopped walking. "Wait. What?"

"You heard me." She stopped walking too and pointed at the house again. "*George*. Fucking. Wickham."

"Dubya." Darcy murmured. He hadn't connected the dots. That 'Dubya' was short for something that started with a *W* was pretty obvious, but there was no way for him to make the leap from the letter *W* to the last name Wickham and therefore to Giana's horrible ex.

She snorted and kept walking, talking loudly over her shoulder at him. "Yeah. Sounds like the kind of dumbass nickname he'd come up with."

"Holy shit, G." He trotted to catch up to her. "I never would've brought you here if I had known."

"Yeah, well, I didn't know either. This place is new since we broke up. No way you could have known." Giana kicked a pebble on the sidewalk with the toe of her boot, sending it skittering into the streetlamp-lit street.



“Did he try to talk to you?”

Giana snorted again. “Am I in handcuffs right now for trying to kill him?”

“Fair enough.”

“Is he living here with... her?”

She shook her head. “No way a woman lives there with him. And no sign of a kid, either.”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s true.” Darcy frowned. “No sign of a kid. Not just that there isn’t kid stuff *everywhere*, but there was absolutely zero sign of a kid at all.”

Giana peered at him. They arrived at the car, and he went around to the driver’s side, lost in his thoughts.

“How much of the house did you see?” she asked, her tone telling him that she knew more than she was letting on.

He coughed and got in the car. Making an awful lot of unnecessary noise, he started the car and fidgeted with the seat settings and mirrors. “Isn’t it weird how much you move around in the driver’s seat, and have to adjust stuff every time you get in,” he muttered.

“Darcy.” Giana’s voice held a warning tone. “How much. Of the house. Did you see?”

He sighed and put the car in gear. “I saw the inside. And the guest room.”

She slapped his arm.

“Did you really? Hot damn! About time you got laid.”

He didn’t respond to that.

“So... who’s the lucky girl?” She poked at him, too eager by far for him to feel comfortable answering that question. She gasped.

Darcy cringed. Giana knew him better than anybody, except maybe Brett. Of course she would figure it out.

“It’s that Hunter woman, isn’t it? The one you chased across CrossFit gyms?”

Darcy sighed again.

Giana crowed and laughed, slapping her hand on her thigh. “Wow, I can’t believe you got her that fast. The last

time you were talking about her, you were making it sound like you had blown it, like you had wasted your chance with her. Man. I am so happy for you! So are you guys, like, *together* now? Or are you gonna keep it casual? Friends with benefits? Or, I guess... competitors with benefits? Man. A gym-buddy-sex-buddy who also does the same job you do for a living... actually that's kind of perfect—"

"G..." His tone was warning.

"Uh oh."

"Yeah."

Giana's energy dropped and Darcy felt his somber mood fill the car in the absence of her jubilation. "What happened?" she asked, her voice quiet.

"She hates me."

"Hates you? But didn't she... You didn't...?"

"What? God, no!"

"Okay, well, it didn't seem like you, but I can't really think of another reason for a woman to have sex with you at a party and then tell you she hates you."

"That's *why* she had sex with me."

"Ohhhhhhhh..." Giana said, settling down into her seat. "That's messed up."

"Yeah."

They drove for a long time in silence. He could have put some music on, or she could have, but they both decided to sit and stew in their misery. L.A. was never a quiet place, but this part of town was relatively peaceful, and Darcy listened to the sound of the tires on the asphalt.

Hesitantly, he broke the silence. "How did you know it was his place?"

"I recognized some of the furniture when we walked through, but I thought it was a coincidence. Or maybe that I was projecting or some shit like that."

"That's not what projecting means."

"Bite me."

"Sorry. Continue. You were ... projecting."

Now Giana sighed. "I recognized some of his stuff, but I didn't think it could really be *his* place, you know? And it's not like it's designer stuff, or fancy stuff. He probably got a lot of it at, like, Ikea and shit."

"Lot of dudes shop at Ikea and shit."

"Exactly."

The sound of tires on asphalt between them once more. Darcy turned onto their street.

"But?" he prompted her. His voice was barely above a murmur.

"But I saw him. And I saw the girl he was hitting on."

"*Another* girl? Not the baby mama?"

"Nope. Not the baby mama. A new girl. Some chick with purple streaks in her hair and tattoos on her neck. Just his type."

"Sounds like it."

"Anyway, I saw him, and I knew if I talked to him I would strangle him, so I left. I went and I sat on the curb and I waited. I wasn't sure where you were or if you wanted to leave. I knew Brett didn't want to go anywhere."

"You could have texted."

"Would it have mattered? It's not like you were available anyway."

Darcy shrugged. He turned the car off. They were home, but he wasn't ready to go back upstairs yet. To headquarters. To the work that he suddenly felt very disconnected from. Liza was so passionate about her work. She was passionate about it the way Brett was passionate about it. Darcy himself had never been able to muster that kind of fervor. He'd mostly fallen into Hunting and kept doing it because Brett needed a Hunter for the business to roll forward.

"You were busy, Brett was busy, I debated getting an Uber, but then you came outside and found me, and here we are."

"Yeah. Here we are."

Another long silence filled the car. Giana stared out the window and Darcy stared at the steering wheel, tracing the leather stitching with the tip of his finger.

"Why does she hate you?" Giana asked.

"Because she thinks I stole her job, her contract. That I'm ruining her life."

"Are you?"

"Kind of. But not on purpose."

"Well, then, I guess she gets to just keep hating you."

"Like you get to keep hating George."

"Exactly like that."

"You think that me taking a job that I didn't know anybody else was qualified for is the same as him cheating on you and trying to force the eighteen-year-old mistress to have an abortion?"

Giana scowled at the reminder and then softened. "I guess what you're doing is a little less horrible."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN – LIZA

The following morning, Liza skipped her usual Saturday morning workout for a long run. She meant what she had said about getting Darcy out of her system, and she was fairly confident that she had succeeded, but she wasn't about to risk seeing him at the gym and getting her panties all worked up again.

After her run and a shower, she picked up breakfast burritos and coffee and headed over to Jane's. Jane had driven Liza home last night, after Lydia had texted them to say she didn't need a ride, so Liza assumed there would be a great need for hangover food at Jane's apartment.

She let herself in without knocking, calling out for Jane as she did so.

Jane shuffled into the living space from the hallway, looking frumpled and groggy, but not an absolute wreck.

"Okay," Liza said appraisingly, "Not too bad, then, eh?"

Jane grunted and headed for the kitchen.

Liza followed. "I've got coffee and I've got food."

"Oh thank god. You got Alondra's."

"Only the best for a hangover cure."

"I'm not hungover," Jane said.

"Just grumpy, then? Okay. But Lydia is probably hungover."

Jane nodded at that. "You're probably right."

They sat at the breakfast bar in Jane's shabby chic little kitchen, surrounded by cream-colored décor and spotless countertops and unwrapped their burritos and started eating. Liza gave Jane exactly two bites before she jumped in. "So tell me about the guy."

"Brett?"

“Yes, I was a little too drunk to make much sense last night, but it sounded like you were pretty smitten.” Liza hadn’t started drinking until after fucking Darcy, but considering how rarely Liza really drank, it didn’t take a lot to make her unfocused.

Jane sighed and looked at her burrito like it might propose marriage. “He was amazing.”

“Did you kiss him?”

“Not yet – he asked me out on an actual date, though.”

“Whoa.”

“I know! A real-live date, not just a quick hookup and some ‘text you later’ bullshit.”

Liza forced herself to laugh; Jane didn’t know how close her remarks were hitting. She took a drink of her coffee and avoided looking at Jane. Jane, for her part, settled back into her seat, looking distinctly less hungover and more peppy than she had a few minutes ago.

“He’s so smart, Liza.”

“Does he watch documentaries and listen to NPR?”

Jane gave her an impatient look and Liza feigned innocence. Jane’s eyes dropped and she fidgeted with her coffee cup. “He, uh, well,” she blew out a slow breath, “He actually works for Nether Fields.”

Liza’s blood froze. Her food felt like ash in her mouth. “What?”

“He runs their logistics.” Jane kept fidgeting, not meeting Liza’s eyes. “He’s me. I mean, he does the same job I do, but for the other Hunting firm, what are the odds of that?”

Liza huffed out another fake little laugh. “Yeah. What are the odds?”

“He loves the puzzle of finding the next hunt, just like me. He loves the challenge of constantly updating methods and technology. He’s just... he’s great.”

“Mm-hmm.”

"Oh come on, Liza," Jane said softly, her face falling. "Please don't be like this."

"Like what?"

"Like you always are. You decided you hate Darcy—"

"I don't *hate* him." Lie. Maybe?

"Whatever." Jane actually sounded pissed. She started wrapping up her burrito, but then seemed to decide against it, and unwrapped it again. "You decided that you *strongly dislike him* and now you're going to want me to ignore Brett, just because they work together. But come on. If Darcy was forbidding Brett from seeing me, just because he doesn't like you, you'd be so angry. You'd get all angry and stompy and slammy and tell me that it's my life and I can't let some douchebag with too much money tell me how to live it."

"That does sound like me," Liza admitted. She picked at the tortilla, peeling off a charred bit that had separated from the rest. "But I am *not* stompy and slammy."

Liza risked a look at Jane and Jane just arched one eyebrow at her in response.

Liza grumbled. "Much. I'm not stompy and slammy much."

"I like Brett." Jane's tone was calmer, gentler. "He's hot and he's smart and he understands the work I do. Do you know how rare that is?"

"Hello?" Liza swept an exaggerated gesture over her whole body. "Nobody really understands what I do, either."

Jane rolled her eyes. Actually rolled them. Maybe having Lydia here was already rubbing off on her. "People might not fully understand what you do, but there's a mystique to it. A prestige. And every single person in the western world has seen at least one episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, so they think that's what you are. When people think of that show, they think of me as the old librarian guy."

"Not even Alyson Hannigan?"

"They never think of her for some reason."

“Huh.”

They ate in silence for another minute. “I’m sorry, Jane.”

“It’s okay,” Jane murmured.

“It’s not. I have no right to tell you who to date, and if you like him, he can’t be that bad.”

“It’s just one date.”

“Yeah. We’ll see.” Jane was a serial monogamist; every ‘one date’ guy ended up hanging around for at least a year. She stayed single for long stretches of time because she refused to lower her standards for a date or even a hookup.

“Do you want me to go wake up Lydia?” Liza asked after the silence had grown too awkward. They’d repair the rift, they always did. But first they needed to spend a little bit of time pretending it didn’t exist.

“Yeah, I haven’t even poked my head in there yet.” Jane waved in the general direction of the bedrooms and took another long drink of her coffee.

Liza planted a friendly kiss on Jane’s forehead and then went in search of Lydia.

She knocked on the second bedroom’s door – the den’s door, really – and called out, “Lydia? You awake yet, hon?” She pressed her ear to the door, listening for any signs of life. A grunt, a shuffle, anything.

Knocking again, louder this time, she tried again. “Lydia?”

After listening at the door, she knocked more softly and said, “Lydia, I’m coming in to check on you.”

Inside the room was a total disaster. Boxes stacked everywhere, towering all around the bed, which was unmade. Clothes were heaped on the floor of the armoire that was serving as a closet since this wasn’t really a bedroom, the hangers all empty. Nothing on the walls yet, Jane’s mirror and photographs removed and leaning against a wall, with Lydia’s art next to it, ready to go up whenever she got around to it.



But no Lydia.

Liza frowned and stepped all the way into the room, which wasn't big, and poked around just in case. The bed was a mess, but it was most definitely empty.

She left the room and checked the bathroom. Empty, too.

Padding into the kitchen, she expected to see Lydia there; maybe they had just missed each other in the six-hundred-square-foot apartment.

Nope. Just Jane, eyes closed in bliss as she chewed a very un-ladylike mouthful of a chorizo and egg burrito.

Liza went to the living room, which was also still a disaster, to see if Lydia had crashed on the couch when she came home, if she had somehow missed her on her way in, if they had somehow avoided waking her with their argument.

No luck.

"Hey Jane," she said, pulling her phone out and heading back into the kitchen. "Has Lydia texted you?"

"I don't think so - you can check my phone, though."

Liza went back down the short hallway and found Jane's phone on her nightstand. Her bedroom was in slightly better shape than the rest of the apartment, but Hurricane Lydia had displaced an awful lot of Jane's stuff and, by the looks of it, all of it had found its way in here.

Jane's phone had a new text message from a number Liza didn't recognize and that didn't have a name associated with it, but nothing from Lydia.

She handed it over and sat down next to Jane. Chewing on her lower lip, she tried to think of who Lydia had been talking to the night before. Had she seen Lydia at the party after they'd split up? Most of her memories of the night were filled with the conversation with Giana and then the stellar sex with Darcy. Lydia didn't make the highlight reel, despite the fact that Liza and Jane were supposed to be helping Lydia get settled in.

Jane looked at her phone, tapping on different apps, obviously looking for some communication from Lydia.

"Nothing?" Liza asked. "She should be home by now, right?"

"It's still early," Jane said, her voice uncertain.

"It's after ten. Which, sure, isn't all that late for Lydia to sleep on a Saturday, but after a random hookup? It's well past walk of shame time. She should be back. Or at least calling and asking for a ride by now."

Jane's brow scrunched down, the only sign she ever gave that she was really distressed.

"Should we be worried?" Liza asked. Lydia was not the most responsible person Liza knew, but she *was* an adult and had been living more or less on her own for years. Sure, daddy had paid the bills, but she'd gotten herself home and up and dressed and fed.

She would be okay, right?

"I'm not worried yet," Jane said, though the tone in her voice didn't exactly match her words. "If we haven't heard from her by tonight, we can start worrying."

"Has she ever just disappeared with a guy before?"

Jane's eyebrows went up and she pressed her lips together. "Actually. Yeah. She has. She took off to Rocky Point last year, remember? With that tattoo artist? Didn't call or come home for a month."

"Well, I'm not waiting a month to get worried about her."

"Agreed." Jane sounded relieved that Liza was on her side. They finished eating in silence, Jane fiddling with her phone, obviously hoping Lydia would text.

Breakfast finished, Liza put Lydia's burrito in the fridge for later, but decided to just drink the coffee. It was shaping up to be a shitty day and she could use the caffeine.

Jane looked up from her phone, her eyes wary. "We've got a Hunt tonight, and Nether Fields is going to work it with us."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN – DARCY

The new Hunt was a nuisance. A chore. Darcy wanted to get out of this business and settle down, now more than ever. This stupid business of his – of Brett's really; it might have started as his own, but Brett was running things and was the irreplaceable one – had brought him nothing but misery. He had thought coming to L.A. and being close to Giana would be worth it, but now he was tangled up with Liza in irrevocable ways. They were competitors, but their feelings were too personal to keep it professional, and hers were at odds with his. He felt drawn to her, attracted to her in a way he didn't remember ever being attracted to a woman. Their hookup had felt like he'd been handed a winning lottery ticket: that she felt the same way and they could skip all the awkward dating phases.

Instead, she hated him. She saw him as the enemy that she needed to seduce and destroy.

The irony of her behavior mimicking a vampire succubus was not lost on him.

He readied for the Hunt, planning to tell Brett afterward that he would be leaving the business. The city contract could go to Liza's business, or Brett could hire both Liza and her friend to fulfill the contract. Darcy didn't care anymore. He wanted out. No more chasing supernatural monsters late into the night, no more blood on his hands, no more accidental run-ins with Liza Bennet and her infuriating, beautiful face.

Brett settled in at headquarters, double-checking their comms connections and that his tracking software was up and running smoothly.

"Good luck," Brett wished Darcy as Darcy left for the night. He raised the bottle of whiskey, the little tradition that

he insisted on. Raise the bottle before the Hunt, drain the bottle after. They'd stopped 'draining' it years ago, but the movement and the ritual still stuck.

"I don't need luck," Darcy said automatically, cringing at the sound of it. It had felt like the badass thing to say, back when they started this little ritual of theirs. But now it just sounded so douchey. So immature. No wonder Liza hated him.

Darcy arrived at the location Brett had loaded into his GPS, a surprisingly well-kept house at the end of a long cul-de-sac in a lower-income neighborhood. Behind the house, according to his GPS, was a huge state-owned recreation area. Some parks dotted the far end of the green space, but this house had acres and acres of uninhabited nature behind it, a cemetery part of the landscape back there.

The property was surrounded by a shabby stucco wall about six feet high with a dilapidated electric gate and callbox at the end of the driveway. Darcy had flipped his lights off at the entrance to the cul-de-sac and slowed down so the hybrid engine made no sound as he approached. His tires crunched slightly over the asphalt, and he sent up a silent prayer to whatever vampire-hating gods might be out there that he wasn't heard. Most vampires didn't settle in neighborhoods like this and Darcy had a bad feeling about this Hunt.

"Just a heads up," Brett's voice came through the comms, barely above a whisper. "Liza's team will be joining you."

"What?" Now Darcy understood his bad feeling. He pulled away from the house, planning to park his car down the block and approach the property on foot.

"They got the call, too. Looks like Officer Collins roped them in on this one, and she's headed your way."

"By 'Liza's team' I assume you mean...?"

"Just Liza."

Darcy closed his eyes and dropped his head back against his seat. Of course.

"Thanks for the heads up," he finally said, turning the car off. "Who is taking point?"

"Liza will," a female voice said.

Darcy froze, his hand on the door handle. "Who the hell is that?"

Brett cleared his throat. "That is Jane."

Darcy waited.

"I'm directing the operation tonight," Jane said.

"She works with Liza," Brett said quickly. "And she's at headquarters with me."

Darcy closed his eyes and took a steadying breath.

"Liza is approaching from the south." Jane spoke into Darcy's ear and he shoved aside his annoyance. This Jane person hadn't done anything wrong, and it wasn't her fault that Liza had humiliated him. It was *his* fault. He had allowed himself to be vulnerable and he got hurt and oh god, he was really mad at himself, wasn't he?

"She's approaching the property line," Jane said. "If you want to be part of this Hunt, you're going to have to move."

"Wait. She's coming from the south?" Darcy got out of the car and peered around, sure that he must have been mistaken.

"Yes, there's a green space south of the property."

"Shit. She's gonna get there first."

"Yes. Yes, she is," Jane said.

"Move it, Darcy," Brett said.

"Exactly how many people do I need in my ear?"

"At least one more," Giana's voice piped up, though her voice sounded a little distant and echoey, as if she didn't have her own mic and was talking in the background. "Brett's letting me sit in and watch tonight. Fun, huh?"

Darcy groaned and took off at a jog, keeping his eyes peeled for Liza in the distance. Though, if she was on the

other side of the property line, and if she was any good at her job, his human eyes would never see her until it was too late.

"How are we both supposed to do this Hunt at the same time?" he asked as he approached the outer gate to the property.

"Lieutenant Collins says there are three drones," Jane said.

"Who the hell is Lieutenant Collins?" If Hunting was about to become a group sport, Darcy was *definitely* ready to retire.

"He's our connection at the LAPD."

"I told you about him. Officer Collins—"

"Lieutenant," Jane's voice cut in, but Darcy thought he heard disdain dripping from the word.

"He had more intel than they mayor did," Brett offered, as if it was a condolence.

Darcy grunted his acknowledgment and got to work. No cameras on the property that he could see: the wall surrounded a modest house, all stucco and painted the same color as the wall. The wrought-iron rolling gate across the driveway matched the bars on the windows and it all looked like it had seen better days.

It was easy enough to scale the wall, the stucco of which actually crumbled slightly under Darcy's left hand. On the other side of the wall, a gravelly yard was dotted with weeds.

"Watch your steps," came Jane's voice.

"Noted," Darcy whispered. The presence of the gravel was not a good surprise; the vampires would hear his footsteps for sure now.

"Stay put," Liza hissed. "I'm in the back. I'll give you a 'go' signal."

Darcy checked the safety on his crossbow and made sure the bolts in his ammunition belt across his chest were loose enough to pull easily. Liza's footsteps were silent as

she moved through the backyard. As much as he hated to admit it, he'd have to stop here and wait for the attack sign. Otherwise his footsteps would blow their element of surprise.

And the element of surprise was the only way a human could ever get a jump on a vampire.

A small pop came over the comms, like a seal being broken. Darcy assumed it was a window or door being opened somewhere and he kept his eyes peeled on the little house, watching for any sign that Liza would need him but couldn't give the signal.

No lights were on inside, but that wasn't exactly a surprise. Vampires preferred the dark. Some fed in the dark, others turned on the lights so their human victims could see their deaths coming. Neither option sounded like a lot of fun to Darcy, but then he wasn't a vampire.

Tires on the asphalt on the street outside the wall caught Darcy's attention.

Then a low beep and the rattle of the chain on the rolling gate.

"Shit." He pressed himself against the wall, hoping his black clothing and the shadows were enough to protect him.

A car slowly rolled into the driveway, a slick black VW Jetta with flashy aftermarket parts, including running lights and an obnoxious spoiler across the back.

Darcy frowned. Must be a newer vampire; most immortals had little patience for fads or anything they saw as 'youthful'. They were more likely to drive classic muscle cars or expensive luxury vehicles if they drove anything at all. Having an eternity to live - plus no employment and little social life - made rushing around in a car a little unnecessary.

The car stopped and the engine cut off, leaving a deafening silence in its wake. Darcy hardly dared to breathe as he watched. In his ear, Liza was still moving silently somewhere in the backyard. He'd been on this side of the

wall for less than a minute and shit was gonna go down soon, he could feel it.

A man got out of the car and Darcy's eyes popped wide when he recognized Coach Dubya.

George Fucking Wickham, Giana's ex and the host of the disastrous party from the night before.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – LIZA

Liza cringed as she, once again, heard the gravel shift beneath Darcy's weight in the front yard. She wanted to snap at him to hold still, to stay silent, but even a whisper could be a death sentence for her now.

She was in the house, having broken in through a bedroom window in the back. Bars on the front windows, but none on the back. The illusion of safety for whatever humans had lived here. Same as the low wall out front, but the exposed backyard with miles of open space behind.

No lights, as always, were on inside the vampire lair.

The house smelled like a human house, though. Perfumes and soaps and dirty laundry. All things that faded with time, things that vampires didn't need to bother with. Vampire lairs were either very dirty, smelling of blood and rot, or else cleaner than a hospital operating room, smelling of bleach and other disinfecting cleaners. Vampires only went one of two ways: they either went completely feral or they overcompensated and tried to eliminate all evidence of blood from their lairs, thus erasing all that made them human, too.

A car door opened and closed out in front of the house, echoed in Liza's comms. That meant Darcy was still in the yard, close enough for his mic to pick up the sound that she was hearing from outside the little house.

She'd have to hope Darcy could handle whoever the newcomer was, because she was in the hall, headed for the main living space.

Most new vampires – and this was definitely a new vampire, based on the smell of the house and the fact that Officer Collins had been able to spot her on his own – still ate their meals in the kitchen, out of habit.

Their meals were just a bit... messier.

Liza crept down the hall, now hearing the low murmurs of vampire voices, talking too quietly and too quickly for her to parse.

A stake in each hand, she approached the end of the hall.

Her combat boots fell on carpeted floors, silent as a ghost. Photographs still hung on the walls, so she was forced to walk in the center of the hall, lest she knock into anything and make a sound that would alert the vampires to her presence.

Moonlight spilled in from the back door, or a window, casting a bluish light into the space where the hall, the living room, and the kitchen all met.

Liza took a deep breath and let it out, then leapt into the kitchen, ready to kill.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN – DARCY

“What the *fuck*?!” Giana’s voice was in Darcy’s ear, but far away, not connected to the comms, but yelling in the background. “That is *George*. What the fuck is he doing at a vampire house?”

“Lair,” came Jane’s voice calmly.

Darcy flinched, sure that the vampires could hear their voices. They were watching his bodycam footage, of course, and Giana was not handling it like a pro.

Dubya – George – didn’t hear them, though. He looked toward the house, never turning to where Darcy hid in the shadows. He seemed nervous, fidgety. After pocketing his keys, he moved to the back door of the car and opened it.

“Drop your weapon, Darcy,” Brett’s voice said.

Darcy lowered his crossbow fractionally, letting his bodycam see the scene more clearly.

George Wickham was struggling with something in the backseat as Jane and Brett debated the best course of action. Jane wanted Darcy to stand down, to let George do whatever he was going to do, and then move only on Liza’s signal. Brett was arguing that Wickham had the code to get into the gate, which meant he was trusted by a vampire queen which could never be good. He needed to be killed, too. Captured and incapacitated, at the very least. If he wasn’t hoping to become a vampire himself, he was helping a vampire kill humans, and that was murder.

Darcy’s decision was made when he saw what Dubya was struggling with: a young woman, unconscious in the backseat of his car. He was putting her up on his shoulders in a fireman carry.

This was a tribute for the queen, no doubt about it. Brett was right; George was helping a vampire kill humans

and that was as bad as killing them himself, in Darcy's book.

Darcy took aim and shot a bolt directly into George's ass, and the coach dropped to the ground with a wild shout of profanity.

Darcy reloaded automatically, sprinted forward, to hell with the sound of gravel beneath his boots, and finished tackling George.

The girl on his back got roughed up a bit in the exchange, but Darcy pulled George away from her, leaving her in a heap next to the car. She was unconscious, which would make fighting George easier, but Darcy prayed it wouldn't prevent him from being able to rescue her when the fight was over.

George was strong as hell, fighting Darcy with all he had, but he had a crossbow bolt in his ass. Darcy dragged him upward and put the coach between himself and the house, knowing what a vampire queen would do when she heard the ruckus out front.

Sure enough, just as Darcy had George back on his feet – and cursing like a sailor at the top of his lungs – a pair of drones spilled out of the front door.

Darcy held George in front of him with his left arm, his right aiming the crossbow out in front of them. He fired, and the wooden bolt buried itself in the first vampire's heart, dropping him in an instant. This was close enough range to pierce the heart fully, and the vampire exploded into a cloud of dust before he had fully dropped to the gravel.

The second vampire would be a problem, given that Darcy had only one hand and couldn't reload again. If given the choice, Darcy would sacrifice George and save the girl, but he wasn't sure how valuable George was to the vampires' hive. He dropped the crossbow and pulled a short blade from his waistband, aiming it at George's throat, but keeping it at a safe enough distance until he knew which way things were going. No sense killing off a perfectly good hostage.

“Hand him over,” the vampire said, putting her hands up in a gesture of surrender. She was young, at least as vampires go. Turned as a very young woman, probably in her early twenties, she looked calm, reasonable, not yet prone to the feral madness that so many of them took on in later decades.

Interesting. She wanted George, not the girl. The sacrificer, not the sacrifice herself, was the prize here.

“He’s important to our queen,” the drone explained. The queen wanted George, but not badly enough to come out of the house. But Liza was in the house. Darcy paused, pretending to think, hopefully giving Liza enough time to take out the queen. He heard the attack start over his comm piece, the drone’s head cocking to the side as she heard the fight start inside too. Her eyes widened in panic and Darcy made his decision.

“Fair enough,” he said, and he shoved George away from him and toward the vampire, who caught him in her arms. She lifted him easily, cradling him like a baby. The bend in his legs tugged at the crossbow bolt and he cried out, cursing like a sailor, blood dripping on the concrete beneath him. The vampire’s eyes seemed to glow in response to the free-flowing blood, but she managed to control herself. Not *too* young, then.

Darcy stood over the girl, reloading his weapon.

The vampire disappeared inside with George, leaving Darcy to make a decision.

He scooped up the girl. She was breathing, but definitely unconscious. She looked familiar, but he couldn’t place her. Her pulse was steady and there were no obvious bite marks or wounds, so he decided to put her someplace safe, out of the way of the fighting, and get on with his job.

Silently begging the universe to protect Liza in the vampires’ lair, he deposited the girl as gently as he could in the backseat of George’s car, knowing his bodycam was capturing everything; if he didn’t make it out of this fight

tonight, at least Brett would know where the girl was and how to rescue her. And hopefully a vampire didn't drive off with this girl in the backseat.

Through those tense moments, Darcy listened to the fight over his comms.

"They're in the kitchen still," Brett said. "She's holding up, but get in there, fast."

Darcy didn't need to be told twice.

He slammed through the front door and into the darkened house, following the sounds of the fight coming from the kitchen at the back of the house.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN – LIZA

Liza had staked the first vampire, one of the drones, without much drama. The queen, however, was another story entirely. She was unlike anything Liza had ever seen before, fighting with unparalleled ferocity.

The queen was angry and vicious, but sloppy. Liza guessed she was newly turned, that would explain the sloppiness. And the strength; vampires tended to fade in strength as the decades went on, replacing it with speed and stealth.

For several panic-inducing moments, Liza wrestled with the young queen, who managed to wriggle out of any hold Liza could put on her.

The front door slammed and what felt like a split-second later Liza was lifted bodily off her opponent and slammed into a wall. Moonlight was still the only light in the house, casting eerie shadows around the room that Liza and the queen had smashed up. Stars danced in her vision, her head ringing, but she didn't fall the floor, didn't crumple like she expected to.

A female drone held Liza against the wall, awaiting order from the queen.

"Did George make it back?" the queen asked, her valley girl voice frantic. She sounded like a Kardashian having a panic attack.

"He's on the couch," the drone responded. Her voice was silky smooth, raising goosebumps along Liza's arms. "He was shot, but he'll be fine."

"That's the blood I smell." Now the queen sounded like a Kardashian ready to faint.

Liza kicked out but the drone easily evaded her, her grip never wavering. This drone was the dangerous kind:

young enough to still be scary strong, but old enough to have control. Liza's brain whirled, searching for a solution. Stars still danced in her vision, the drone's grip tight enough on her chest to restrict her already labored breathing.

She kicked again and again, while the drone's eyes narrowed, annoyance clear on her face while she waited for her queen to recover emotionally and give a command. Liza just hoped whatever command was coming would give her a chance to fight for her life.

The front door slammed again, and both the drone and the queen looked away.

Taking advantage of the split-second distraction, Liza twisted out of the drone's grasp, pulling another stake from the holster in her boot. Somebody flipped on the lights and Liza blinked in the sudden brightness. A *thwop* sounded and the drone dropped to the ground in front of Liza. A crossbow bolt jutted from the vampire's chest and Liza stomped on it, driving it all the way through the heart. The vampire disappeared in a cloud of dust and Liza's boot stomped the rest of the way to the linoleum floor.

"Liza, are you alright?"

Liza looked up to see Darcy reloading his crossbow. She swiveled, looking for the queen who had been here just a moment ago.

"Where's the queen?" she asked.

Darcy nodded to the back door, which was open. They both ran for it, Darcy with his crossbow, Liza with the stake she'd pulled for the drone.

"I had everything under control," Liza snapped.

"Clearly," was Darcy's droll response.

He went left, she went right, knowing they'd meet back around the front of the house, hoping the queen hadn't jumped the back fence. If she got into the nature preserve out back, they'd have a hell of a time tracking her down.

Liza arrived in the front yard – really a tiny gravel and cement wasteland – to see Darcy already there, scanning the



space with his weapon up.

"She in the preserve," a male voice sounded in Liza's ear. Must be Brett, Darcy's second.

"What?" Liza asked, not putting her stake away. "How do you know that?"

"We've got eyes from a satellite image... and she's gone."

"Gone? How can you have eyes one second and then —"

"There are trees, Liza," Jane said. She sounded defeated, frustrated. "A lot of them. We saw her jump the fence and take off and then she disappeared beneath some trees."

"That would have been nice to know ten seconds ago, guys," Darcy snarled.

"Sorry," was all Brett had to say. Jane echoed the word, sounding guilty.

"Well let's go get her, then." Liza turned to run back to the backyard, but Jane cut her off.

"Stand down, Liza. There are humans still on site."

"What? What humans? Collins said this was a hive - three drones and the queen."

"There's a girl in the car," Darcy said, gesturing. "I'll guess the other is George and he's probably still in the house."

"George?" Liza asked.

"Leave the girl in the car," Brett said. "Go talk to George."

"Yeah, go talk to George," a female voice yelled from the background. "Ask him if he wants to eat a bag of dicks or a box of assholes."

"A box of assholes?" Liza frowned, looking to Darcy for some kind of explanation.

"Don't ask," he said, shaking his head. "And also, meet my sister, Giana."

"Charming," Liza said, giving him a dirty look.

"She's more justified than you might think." They both went through the front door, weapons still drawn and ready.

George Wickham was on all fours, crawling for the back door, heavily favoring the glute that had a bolt sticking out of it. Blood stained the couch, the carpet, and trailed across the linoleum in his wake.

"Call for an ambulance," Darcy said and Brett responded in the affirmative before George could object. "We'll cover the medical costs, George, don't worry about that."

"I don't want your help, I need to find..."

"*Can* you find her?" Liza asked. She stood over him, not bothering to stop him. He could crawl out to the weed-filled backyard if he wanted to, but he wouldn't get over the eight-foot cinderblock fence in his condition. Let him wear himself out trying if he wanted to. "If she doesn't want to be found? And while you're crawling around like a three-legged mutt?"

George crumpled and Liza crouched next to him. His pulse was weak but fairly steady and sweat beaded across his forehead and nose. The bolt was likely stopping the bleeding from being worse.

"Ambulance is en route," Jane's voice said gently in Liza's ear. "Figure out why he's delivering human tributes to a vampire."

Liza watched her coach as he lay, bleeding and sweating and looking just generally pathetic on the cheap linoleum floor of the smashed-up kitchen. A bright light fixture hung overhead, illuminating just how bad he looked. She was going to have to coax information out of him. She really didn't want to.

"Hey Dubya," Liza said, hating herself for using his stupid nickname, but knowing time was of the essence and flattering his stupid ego would be her best bet right now. "How'd you get mixed up with a vampire queen?"

“That’s his baby mama,” Giana shouted in the background of the comms.

Liza shot Darcy a look, to find him wincing. “Did you know this?” she hissed at him. He hesitated and then shook his head, but it wasn’t very convincing. There was a story there. She turned back to George.

“Coach?” she prompted him again. George couldn’t have heard Giana’s accusation, but he was still silent, breathing awkwardly, looking like he wanted to pass out.

George groaned wordlessly and said, “Bridget. Bridget is...” he hissed out a breath.

“You knew Bridget before she turned?” Liza guessed, trying to make sense of what Giana was raving about in the background. The mics weren’t picking her up properly, but Liza was catching bits and pieces that sounded like Giana really would like to come stomp on this bolt in George’s left ass cheek.

George nodded, not meeting Liza’s eyes.

“Four minutes,” Jane’s voice said gently.

“Alright, no more beating around the bush,” Liza said. “You knew Bridget before she was turned, and we’ve got a witness that tells us even more than that. You got Bridget pregnant?”

“He told you?” George said, cutting an angry look at Darcy.

“I didn’t say anything,” Darcy said coolly, putting one hand up in a gesture of surrender. The other hand held his crossbow at the ready, belying the gesture.

“Why would *he* know?” Liza asked.

“Because,” Darcy answered, “Mr. Coach George Wickham here was still dating my sister when he got Bridget pregnant.”

“Ohhhhhh.” Liza rocked back on her heels, relaxing slightly. “That’s why Giana wants you to eat a box of assholes.”

George just groaned.

“So where would Bridget go now?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “This is her house, she’ll probably come back here.”

“If she died, the landlord will be notified and they’ll release the place.”

“There’s no record of her death,” he said. “She was turned at a party, I stopped it on accident, otherwise she would have been killed. It took her months to turn, since it was only a partial bite, and the vampire hadn’t intended to turn her.”

“So you impregnated her *and* you saved her? From a vampire *while* it was feeding?” Liza had a sudden thought. “Wait. Where’s the baby?” She looked around, as if expecting a baby to come rolling into the room as if on cue.

“She lost the baby,” George said. He actually sounded sad. “During the transition. It took forever, like I said. We didn’t have any idea what was happening.”

“I’ve ... never heard of such a thing,” Liza said, feeling sick to her stomach. She looked to Darcy. He shook his head again, but his expression mirrored her feelings. Slowly turning, a baby dying inside her. Bridget’s last few months as a human must have been torturous. And she had an asshole like George by her side for it. “That explains why you’re caught up with the hive. You feel guilty.”

George nodded. A siren approached outside.

“Have you helped her kill anyone, George?” Darcy’s voice was firm, authoritative.

“She turned her drones.” George offered the information up like a kid tattling in order to get himself out of trouble.

“That’s convenient,” Liza snorted. “No kills, just turns. How long has she been a vampire and managed to not kill a single person?”

“What about the girl outside?” Darcy interrupted. “Was *she* going to be turned?”

“I assume so,” George said after a long pause. He avoided their eyes; he knew more than he was letting on, but he wouldn’t turn on his queen, his baby mama

The siren neared, blaring loudly through the open front door, red lights flashing through the little house.

“I don’t believe you’re telling us everything. You’re holding back,” Liza said, her voice urgent. George dropped his head down onto the linoleum beneath him, not answering her.

Paramedics clambered into the house, a gurney rattling over the entryway. Liza stood and moved out of the way, finding a place near Darcy. In such a small room, there was little choice but to press up against him. They both holstered their weapons, then shared a look and crept out of the house altogether.

## CHAPTER TWENTY – DARCY

Out in the dreary front yard, the evening was crisp and breezy. A nearly full moon bathed everything in a bluish haze. Darcy spoke into his comms device: “Do you have eyes on the queen yet?”

“She hasn’t resurfaced,” Brett said. He spoke quickly, eagerly, as if trying to prove that he was on top of things. Something was going on back at headquarters, but Darcy didn’t want to dig into it. Brett knew what he was doing, plus he had Jane at his side, and she was just as competent as he was.

“We think she’s hanging out in the nature preserve,” Jane said. Her voice had the same energy, but Darcy didn’t know if that was normal for her or not. “This recon gear is incredible, Liza. There’s a couple city parks and a cemetery, lots of tree cover. It would be suicide for you to go in after her.”

“We’ve got reason to believe she’ll come back here anyway,” Liza said. She was holding her face up to the sky, as if she was relishing the cool air on her skin, which was glistening with sweat. “Have either of you ever heard of a woman being turned while she was pregnant?”

“Hmmm. I haven’t,” Brett said, in a voice that told Darcy he was already googling.

“Let us know what you find,” Darcy said. He went straight for the backseat of George’s car in the driveway. The girl was there, still breathing but also still unconscious. The car was full of the cloying scent of marijuana mixed with a fruity scent, probably from a vape pen.

“Who’s this girl?” Liza asked from behind him. He turned to see her peering intently over his shoulder. Her voice sounded nonchalant, but her body language was

tense, worried. The moonlight played across her face, exaggerating an anxious expression.

Darcy moved aside, gesturing that she was welcome to take a look. She poked her head into the car, then jerked, slamming her skull into the roof, cursing, "Sonofabitch!"

"You okay?" he asked, putting a hand on her back.

She stood up, rubbing the back of her head. When she spoke, she didn't look at him, and her words were for the crowd on the other side of the communications line. "It's Lydia. Jane. It's Lydia."

"Lydia? What? What do you mean?" Jane's voice in Darcy's ear was frantic. There was a slight pause as she realized what Liza meant. Her voice pitched even higher as she asked, "Is she okay?"

"Lydia, who's Lydia?" Brett asked. Darcy looked to Liza for an explanation, but it was Jane's voice that provided one.

"That's my sister," she said. He could hear rustling and scrambling on the other end of the line, as if there was a lot of movement. "She was at George's party with us last night and she didn't come home this morning."

"This solves that mystery," Liza said. "You've *got* to convince her to raise her standards in men, Jane."

"You don't need to tell me twice," she muttered.

"Oh yes I do," Liza shot back. "I've told you this at least ten times."

Darcy shushed her as the paramedics came out of the house. Liza turned back into the Jetta, putting herself almost completely into the backseat, murmuring something Darcy couldn't hear. If she knew the girl, he'd leave her to it.

The paramedics had questions, obviously, but Darcy had also handled these situations thousands of times. He handed over one of his business cards and described the encounter in succinct terms. Paramedics usually ate it all up whenever he used military-type jargon and gestures, and these guys were no different. He also gave his card to George, who was lying on his stomach on the gurney, the

bolt still pointing to the sky from his rear end. Darcy reiterated his promise to pay the coach's medical bills, if necessary.

The paramedics loaded George up and pulled away, leaving Darcy on the vampire queen's driveway with Liza and the girl, Lydia. He stood outside the car, watching as Liza checked the girl over with deft hands. A good Hunter knew first aid, if not some more moderate medical processes. Nature of the job.

"Jane?" Lydia's voice was hoarse and shaky, but Liza's shoulders relaxed visibly. Darcy pulled out his phone and started searching for the nearest hospital. If Liza wanted to move, he'd be prepared.

"Thank god, she's awake," Liza murmured. "Lydia, it's me, Liza. Jane's on the line, though. Say hi."

"Hi," Lydia croaked. "Where am I?"

"This is George's car," Liza gave a partial truth. Darcy marveled at the coincidence, that Liza would personally know this girl who George had been planning to sacrifice to a feral newly turned vampire queen.

"George?" Lydia asked.

Darcy could almost feel Liza's eyes roll as she said through gritted teeth, "Dubya. Coach Dubya."

"Oh," was Lydia's only reply.

"Hey Liza?" Darcy called gently. Liza leaned back, out of the car, keeping a hand on her friend. "We really should get her out of here. If it was just you and me, we could stay and wait for the queen but..."

"We need to get her safe," Liza said, gesturing to Lydia with her head.

Darcy nodded. "My car is up the block a bit."

"I'm parked on the far side of the preserve, in the cemetery parking lot."

He tried not to be annoyed. He wanted to be back at headquarters, listening to Brett's inevitable history of pregnant-when-turned vampires and what they needed to



know about this particular queen. How they could better prepare for their next encounter with her.

"I don't want to leave her here," Liza said pointedly. "She probably needs a hospital, too, to make sure whatever George drugged her with is out of her system safely."

"Of course," Darcy responded. "Can you carry her to my car?"

Liza gave him a weird look, but he couldn't figure out what he'd said wrong. He shrugged and gestured for her to move, which she did. He got Lydia out of the back of the car in a fireman's carry; she was unconscious again, and he carried her down the driveway toward the street.

"Are you coming?" he called back over his shoulder to Liza.

He heard the car door shut and her boots land lightly as she jogged to catch up with him. The gate was still open from when the emergency personnel had forced it open, it yawned halfway across the driveway, plenty of room for Darcy to walk right off the property.

They walked in near silence to his car, which Liza opened up for him to deposit Lydia gently in the backseat. Lydia groaned and squirmed, but settled back into unconsciousness easily.

"Can I ride with you?" Liza asked.

"What? Yeah, of course, that's what I thought—" Darcy took a breath, opening his driver-side door. "Yes. Hop in." he couldn't figure out why he felt so off-kilter around this woman. Were his intentions not clear? Did she really think he would have let her walk through the preserve, where an angry vampire was hiding, by herself? They were on the same team, they needed more information, and they had a civilian – that Liza was close to, emotionally – who needed to be gotten to safety first.

Liza got into the passenger seat and Darcy started the car. He drove slowly down the darkened street, aware of Lydia in the backseat and unsure of how delicate he needed

to be with her in this state. Was she tough like Liza? Or more of a wilting-flower type?

Liza sat very still and very stiffly in the passenger seat. She had buckled her seatbelt, but otherwise kept her hands tucked beneath her legs, squeezing herself into the center of the seat, avoiding touching anything in his car.

"Hey Brett? I'll see you back at headquarters," Darcy said.

"Actually, I'm driving Jane to the hospital, she wants to be there for Lydia. I found the one closest to where you are - I assume that's where you're headed? We'll meet you there."

Darcy murmured an agreement and removed the earpiece from his ear.

Liza double-tapped hers, turning it off, then returned her hand to her thigh. She gave him a tight smile, but turned back to watch the road.

They rode in uncomfortable silence to the hospital, which was about fifteen minutes away. Jane and Brett intercepted them at the emergency room entrance, Brett taking Lydia off Darcy's hands and bringing her inside.

There were a lot of questions as a triage nurse got Lydia checked in. Jane spoke with the admissions and financials team, giving them all of Lydia's personal information and as much of her medical history as possible, while Liza stayed with Darcy and answered more of the technical questions about the vampire hive and what had happened to Lydia.

"Did you two send in the guy with the arrow in his butt?" the nurse asked, his eyebrow quirked high in amusement.

"He's the guy who attacked her, actually," Darcy said, unwilling to protect a man who had caused Giana so much heartache and was willing to drug a girl he'd just met so he could sacrifice her to a vampire queen.

"Really? Good to know," the nurse said in a heavy tone. The police would be called and Darcy couldn't bring

himself to feel the least bit sorry about it.

Once Lydia was taken back into an exam room, there wasn't much to do but wait. Jane and Brett settled in, looking more at ease with each other than Darcy would have expected. Brett had gotten his hands on some coffee – but only two cups, one for him and one for Jane.

The emergency room was busy, and there wasn't a lot of sitting space available. The lights were too bright, the room full of buzzing white noise that would give anybody a headache. Darcy still wore all his protective gear, including the bodycam that needed to be downloaded and recharged. He and Liza both were spattered in blood, dust, and the general grime that came with Hunting.

"I'm going to..." he trailed off, not sure why he was telling Liza. Why should she care?

"Yeah, I should head home, too," she said, gesturing to the blood-spattered t-shirt she wore. The blood didn't show easily on a black t-shirt, but Darcy knew from a lot of personal experience how to recognize the darker patches of black and knew how uncomfortable it was to be sitting in someone else's blood for hours on end. "Could you give me a ride?"

Darcy was taken aback; he had figured she would want to be rid of him as quickly as possible, but he stammered out, "Sure, yeah, no problem."

She left him standing awkwardly at the edge of the waiting area and went over to Jane and said something he couldn't hear. Jane stood, as if to hug her, but Liza gestured for Jane to stay back. Jane laughed and nodded, and Liza turned back to follow him out to the parking lot. He clicked the keyless entry, oddly self-conscious of the car. He didn't date a lot and so hadn't really thought about how the car looked to a woman he wanted to impress. He had bought a car that he loved but had a hybrid engine, allowing him to move silently when Hunting. Now the damn thing felt

ostentatious. No wonder she had been so uptight on the ride over here.

He dumped most of his gear in the trunk of the car.

Liza again sat in the passenger seat, but this time her stiff posture was gone. She relaxed, turning herself towards Darcy as he drove, her left arm resting on the console between the seats.

"I'm sorry about your friends," Darcy said. His elbow rested next to hers, and he was keenly aware of the fraction of an inch between them. If this *had* been a date, he might have knocked into her hand with his, using the backs of his fingers to rub against hers.

"Plural?"

"Well. Yeah." He frowned. "George was a friend, too, right?"

Liza snorted and Darcy's heart lightened, an unexpected response. "Not really. I've known him a while, we hooked up once, *months* ago, but nah. He's not really my type."

"The barbed-wire tattoo doesn't do it for you?"

She nudged him with her elbow, the slight touch like a jolt of electricity through him. "And inspirational quotes in Latin across your left shoulder should?"

Darcy fell silent. It was always - *always* - two steps forward, one step back with her. "It's a reminder," he said finally, not entirely sure why he was opening up to her. "It covers a scar that I got on one of my earliest hunts, and it tells me that the best things in life aren't worth dying for, but instead are worth living for. It's a reminder to survive."

A long silence filled the car and Darcy wished he had turned the radio on, just for moments like these.

"That sounds awfully heavy," she finally replied, her voice measured, calm. She leaned on her elbow, her body weight shifting toward him and Darcy resisted the urge to reach for her hand, to twine his fingers through hers while he talked.

Instead, he just nodded. "I was in a bad place. I don't remember ever thinking I wanted to kill myself, but Brett says I definitely scared him, acting like I had nothing to live for."

"You guys are close?"

"He's like a brother to me. You know how it is. You've got Jane. She's probably like a sister to you, too."

Liza gave a small grunt of affirmation and Darcy stifled a sigh. She was never going to see him as anything other than the enemy.

"Jane's been my rock since college," she eventually said. "More than a roommate, better than a best friend, closer than sisters. And that includes her actual sister." She jabbed a thumb over her shoulder, indicating the hospital that was long gone behind them now.

"Yeah, what's with her? She seems like a different sort than you two."

"She's young."

"And? If I'm doing my math right, you were already running your own business by the time you were her age."

"How do you know that?"

"It's all on your website, Liza."

"So you stalked me," she said, her tone joking and light. She poked him in the bicep, teasing him.

"Yes. With all publicly-available information that you use to sell your services to as many people as possible."

"Touché."

He laughed, the band of nervousness around his chest releasing slightly.

"So?" he prompted.

Liza sighed. "Yeah. Lydia is struggling to grow up. She's the baby of the family, the only one who was just a kid when her mom died, the only one still in high school when their dad's business finally took off and he had a lot of money. Jane took out student loans and worked minimum-wage jobs to afford college, didn't get any help from her dad

until she had graduated, but Lydia had it all paid for, including an off-campus apartment, a car so she wasn't at the mercy of someone else to drive her home for visits, the works."

"She still in school?"

"Perpetually." Liza shook her head, chuckling. "She's supposedly in a PhD program right now, but Daddy turned off the tap. He stopped paying her rent and her credit card bills, so who knows what's happening with tuition or whatever costs are associated with a dissertation."

"PhD – that's impressive, isn't it?"

"It's in feminist portraiture."

Darcy hesitated, unsure if his opinion would be welcome. He decided to settle on truth, but not an opinion. "I admit, I don't know what that really means, as far as a research degree goes."

"I don't think she even knows what it means, but with the word 'feminist' in it, most people are afraid that they'll be called ignorant or misogynistic if they admit they don't understand it. If her degrees were all even a little bit related, or if she had a plan on how to use it, or was a passionate, life-long learner, I'd be more impressed. As it is, she seems to be more interested in postponing adulthood, rather than pursuing expertise."

"Hmm." It felt like the only safe thing to say.

"Anyway. She just moved in with Jane, and I guess we just feel responsible for her still. Like she's still the baby that needs to be protected."

"I can see that. I have a younger sister, too."

"Yeah, she dated Wickham, right?"

"Yeah." Darcy turned into the parking lot where Liza had left her car. He should have driven slower. He didn't want her to get out of his car yet.

"Did you know who he was – that he was Giana's ex – when you joined the box? Is that why you came to C of A?"

"No, I wasn't living here when she was dating him—"

“Oh that’s right. I forgot you just moved here.”

“Yeah, this was all while I was in Phoenix,” Darcy said, relieved that he had managed to side-step his reason for being at City of Angels CrossFit. “So anyway, she was dating him, and it was getting pretty serious, at least as far as she was concerned. But then Bridget reached out, telling Giana that George had gotten her pregnant.”

“Unsurprising,” Liza said, shaking her head. Darcy parked next to Liza’s car – it was the only one in the parking lot. Also a hybrid, but a much more modest and reasonable model. Darcy’s car once again made him feel like a preening peacock and he sort of hated himself for it.

“Well, the part that *was* surprising was that Bridget was only eighteen and he had been pressuring her to have an abortion and threatening to break up with her if she didn’t.”

“Wowwwwwww,” Liza said. Darcy turned to look at her as he stopped his car. Her jaw was dropped, her eyes wide.

“Yeah. Like I said earlier, her anger is pretty justified.”

“Okay, yeah, that’s a new level of assholery that I didn’t know about. And Bridget is the vampire queen we lost tonight?” Liza peered out into the darkness of the cemetery, as if the young queen would materialize in the shadows and present herself for destruction.

“Yeah. I’m not clear on how or when she was turned, but she’s clearly no longer pregnant, and there was no baby, and George obviously has some connection to her still that he isn’t being totally honest about.”

“Still some work to be done,” she said.

“Agreed.” He turned his car off, letting the silence stretch between them, significantly more comfortable than it was before.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE – LIZA

Liza's arm was still resting on his console, her hand exceptionally close to Darcy's – close enough to touch. All she had to do was shift her weight. He wasn't looking at her, but she could feel the weight of him *not* looking more palpably than anything she could remember. The space between them felt charged, like they were magnets. Either drawn together or repulsed apart from one another. Nothing in between. There could be no friendly camaraderie.

He'd opened up to her, and he wasn't the asshole she thought he was. He'd been genuinely helpful with Lydia, when he could have been judgmental, and he dealt with the paramedics and the doctors and let Liza focus on her friend.

Liza wasn't sure she could keep up the hostility. He wasn't an enemy, no matter what his business had done to hers when he arrived. That was more the mayor's fault than Darcy's, and Liza was having a difficult time remembering why she had blamed him so thoroughly in the first place.

"I'd like to see you again," he said, his voice soft. Almost as if he was unsure of her response.

Liza's heart spluttered. She had hated this guy just two days ago. The sex had been to get him out of her head, not to lure him in permanently. Most guys were more than happy to bang one out and move on, no strings attached. But now Liza wasn't sure she could keep up the hostility. He wasn't an enemy, no matter what his business had done to hers when he arrived. That was more the mayor's fault than Darcy's, and Liza was having a difficult time remembering why she had blamed him so thoroughly in the first place.

"Liza?"

She had been silent too long.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," she hedged.



"I'm not going to try to convince you - but..." he took a deep breath and turned to look at her, his dark eyes beseeching. "Can I ask why not? I promise I'll believe you, and take you at your word, but it feels like there's something here. To me, at least."

She bit down on a smile. Dropped her eyes. She focused on his hand, so close to hers. "I'm just not looking for a relationship."

"Ever?"

"No. Just. Not right now. It's hard to date when you work nights," she said, falling back on her tried-and-true excuse. It sounded so flimsy all of a sudden.

"I work the same schedule," he pointed out very reasonably.

"That's true." Liza tried to think back to when she first started telling people this. Did she actually *want* to be single? Or had she fallen into the habit of using her job as an excuse to fend off creeps? She did enjoy kissing Darcy. And a man with a body like his, who *wasn't* a total dick about most things, and who could go down on her as expertly as he did, was a rare catch. "I just haven't been in a relationship in a long time."

"Neither have I."

She scoffed. "I find that hard to believe."

"Well." His lips twisted up into a half-smile and his eyes took on a wicked gleam. "It's hard to date when you work nights."

She laughed.

"So, is that it?" he asked. "You haven't been in a relationship in a while, and your schedule is rough? I feel like we could make that work. I'm not looking to get married tomorrow or anything, and in fact I wasn't looking for anything at all. But you... you came along, and you're strong and sexy and interesting—"

She kissed him. Hard.

Darcy wasted no time in responding. His hand went to her jaw, his thumb caressing her as he kissed her thoroughly.

Liza leaned into the kiss, running her hand up into his hair, pulling him closer to her. She ran the tip of her tongue along his lower lip and he obliged her by opening up. He groaned against her mouth, deepening the kiss, his tongue soft and strong against hers.

She pulled back and locked eyes with him. His expression was dazed, his breathing as heavy as hers.

"You're a *fantastic* kisser," she breathed.

He smiled. "You're one to talk." Then he pulled her back in again.

Darcy kissed her, his tongue expertly sweeping through her mouth. He moved his kisses to her throat and then the spot behind her ear that made her toes curl.

Liza wriggled in the passenger seat, heat building between her legs. The urge to mount him, to climb into his lap, was growing, despite the cramped conditions in his car. He continued to press kisses to her throat until he reached her ear once more. He nibbled at it, testing her, teasing her.

She pulled lightly on his hair, bringing his face back up to hers. She kissed him, groaning against his mouth as his hand found her breast. He massaged her and kissed her until she felt light-headed, dizzy, elated.

Darcy began working his way down her throat, his hand working her bra and her t-shirt up and out of the way, his intention clear.

"I know I said I wasn't looking for anything serious," Liza breathed as she arched her back, offering her body to his expert hands. "But hooking up wouldn't be the worst idea."

Darcy pulled away from her, the space between them feeling cold. Liza adjusted her shirt and her bra, wondering what had gone wrong. Darcy was running his hands through his hair, breathing heavily.

"I don't want random hookups," he said, his voice gravelly.

Five words. Five words clunked through her brain. She tried to make them make sense, tried to re-order them so they formed a coherent thought that she could understand. A man who didn't want random hookups?

"I... what?" she managed.

Darcy shook his head. "I don't want hookups. Not with you. I want something real, or ... or I need to walk away. Keep this professional."

Liza sat in stunned silence for several heartbeats.

"I don't know what to say." Idiotically, Liza felt rejected. He was saying he wanted her, that he wanted a relationship, but he was turning down her offer of non-committal sex, and it hurt just the same as any other rejection. She didn't want to leap at the offer of a relationship, didn't want to be That Girl. Instead, she said, her voice on the verge of cracking, "Maybe I should just go?"

"I don't want you to," Darcy said. He looked at her, his expression plainly vulnerable, his eyes wide and earnest. Then he turned away, looking out the windshield to the darkened cemetery beyond. When he spoke again, his voice was calm and measured. "But if that's what you want, then I won't argue with you."

She didn't want to. She didn't want to leave at all. She wanted to stay and steam up the windows, she wanted to bring him home with her and find out what else that tongue of his was capable of. But admitting all this out loud felt too vulnerable, too real. She hadn't been real with anyone in a very long time, and she wasn't about to start now. Darcy could take his expert tongue and impressive cock and go find somebody else to fuck until the sun came up.

Instead of saying any of that, Liza just nodded. She didn't trust her voice, she didn't trust herself. If she spoke, she'd ask him to follow her home. If she asked him to follow her home, she'd ask him to stay.

So she just left. She opened the door and didn't look back as she began to cross the distance to her own car a few feet away.

She had her hand on her door handle when she heard Darcy's car door open and shut. Turning, she watched him come around the front of his car, desire gleaming in his eyes.

"What are you doing?" she asked, breathless.

"I'm going to show you that you're making a mistake," he said.

She didn't wait for him, she closed the distance between them, their bodies colliding and melding together like yin and yang.

"Oh thank god," she said between kisses, tugging at his shirt.

He pressed her back against her driver's side door and she lifted one leg to wrap around his waist. His mouth moved from hers to her throat, again blazing a trail of heat down her neck, behind her ears, and into the hollow above her collarbone.

Liza lifted his shirt between them and dragged her fingernails down his back.

Darcy's groan against her collarbone almost had her completely undone.

Her hands dragged down again, until she hit the waistband of his jeans. She ran her fingertips along the inside of his boxer briefs, exploring the boundary of intimacy. Toying with it.

One of Darcy's hands hitched her leg higher, grabbing at her thigh, her ass. Her black leggings left little to the imagination, but that hand found its way inside anyway, grabbing at the ass cheek exposed by her thong.

He kissed her throat, her ear, his tongue raising goosebumps all over her body, and she ground her hips against his, inviting him, *begging* him to take more.

Liza went for the button on his jeans and he paused, letting her get inside, get her hand around his cock. He

groaned again, dropping a fist onto the roof of the car as she stroked his length.

"I want you," she breathed into his ear before nipping at it with her teeth. His mouth against the base of her throat grew more insistent, more urgent.

"Here?"

"Yes. Now."

He pulled away from her, just slightly, and turned her around. She leaned over the hood of the car as he tugged on the waistband of her leggings and her underwear.

She sighed as he entered her, as he paused and waited for her to adjust to his girth. A second later, she tucked her hips forward slightly and then arched back into him, signaling that she was ready.

His thrusts were long, slow, and deliberate at first. Liza tucked her hips and rocked with him, squeezing his cock as she did so. His hands went up her shirt, under her bra, to her breasts. He cupped her, playing lightly with her nipples as he thrust deeply and carefully.

Liza put one hand over his, directing him to squeeze harder, to play more forcefully.

Darcy took the hint and increased his thrusting, his squeezing. His other hand found her clit, massaging in tight circles in time with his thrusts.

"Harder," she breathed. Afraid he didn't hear her, she turned and spoke louder, over her shoulder. "Harder."

He grunted and obliged, pounding into her, rubbing her clit with an intensity that had her practically seeing stars.

"Oh, god," she said, slapping her free hand onto the cool metal of the car's hood beneath her. If ever there was a time to bunch the sheets up in her fists, this would be it.

Pleasure rocked through her, coming in waves, building and building until she pressed her cheek against the hood of the car, relaxing into her orgasm. She let her eyes close as she moaned, wave after wave rocking her hips.

Darcy's hands stilled, holding her tight, as his own climax came. He pulled out and she turned quickly, taking his cock in her right hand.

Liza jerked him off, finishing what she'd started. She kept her left hand on the back of his neck, her fingers twining into his hair, as she held his gaze in hers. She kissed him once, lightly, until he groaned again and dropped his head against her shoulder, shuddering as he came into her hand.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO – DARCY

“Come home with me,” Darcy said. He kissed Liza, slowly and sweetly. He held her face in his hands. “We can get takeout and talk, figure out what this is.”

Liza kissed him back, her hands resting in his back pockets, as if they belonged there. They were still leaning against her car, his mess cleaned up, everyone’s pants back in place.

“Hmmm.” She kissed him again, her eyes fluttering shut as she sighed. “Didn’t you say you live at your headquarters?”

“Well, yeah. I need to download my bodycam footage for Brett and—”

“Does Brett live there, too?”

He paused. “Yeah. Technically, in a separate unit, but yeah.”

“So we can have some privacy – it’s not really a roommate situation?” She raised one eyebrow at him, biting on her lower lip, and he had a difficult time remembering what it was they were talking about.

“No, it’s not really a roommate situation,” he finally said.

“Fine. We’ll go to your place, but I get to pick the takeout.”

“Deal.” He kissed her again and she leaned back, as if she was savoring it, pulling him against her as she leaned against the car. He felt himself begin to stiffen again, ready for round two. “We better go,” he said, extricating himself from her arms.

Her eyes flicked downward, for just the briefest instant, as if she knew exactly why he needed to break away from her so quickly.

"Follow me," he said, watching as she got into her car. Darcy had to shake himself and jog back around to his driver's side, eager to get to where he was going. Once in his seat, he airdropped his address to her, gave her a small wave, and took off.

For the twenty-minute drive to his condo, Darcy had to fight to opposite urges. One, he wanted to speed through the streets and get home as fast as possible, before she changed her mind, rapidly bringing on the moment when he could hold her again, kiss her, taste her. Two, he irrationally wanted to drive slowly, let her pull up beside him at red lights, flirt and smile and wave, prolong the anticipation, the flirtation, the fun before the fun.

They were halfway there when his phone rang. Darcy nearly jumped out of his skin – who was *calling* at one in the morning? His car Bluetooth display showed a local number he didn't recognize, but he answered it.

"Hello?" he knew he sounded shocked and curious.

"Hi," Liza's voice filled his car.

His shoulders relaxed and he looked to the rearview mirror. He couldn't see her, but he smiled, knowing she was there.

"How'd you get my number?" he asked.

"It's all public information, on your website," she said, using his own words against him.

He chuckled. "Touché."

He drove in silence for a little while, listening to the sound of her car driving behind him. His eyes flicked to the rearview mirror, smiling every time the streetlights illuminated her silhouette. He imagined he could see late-night drowsiness on her features. He hoped he would get to know that face better than he knew his own.

"Why did you call?" he finally asked.

"I'm not sure," she said. He heard her sigh or push out a breath. He wished she was in his car, next to him, so he



could see her expression, read her body language. "I just wanted to."

He smiled. "That's a good enough reason for me. You're in charge of takeout - what are you planning?"

"Well. It's past one in the morning, so our choices are kind of limited, but I know of a burrito and burger stand that's open twenty-four hours near your place."

"Burritos *and* burgers?" He didn't hide his distrust.

"Aren't you from, like, Missouri? Why should you have high standards for your Mexican food?" Her tone was teasing, but still his gut knotted up. Maybe she was being nice but was secretly annoyed?

"I'm trying to acclimatize to the new location. I've been told the Mexican food is very important."

"Very," she said seriously. He imagined her nodding solemnly.

"But you've been here longer, and I gave you control over the food. I am deciding to trust you."

"Wise man."

He turned onto the street that would lead to his condo. "You'll need to park in visitor parking," he said. "You'll see the spots, just wait there and I'll come get you."

"Roger that."

The cell signal got dicey as soon as he pulled into the parking garage beneath his building, so he disconnected the call. Her absence filled the car and he suddenly felt frantic to get parked and get to her as quickly as possible. Darcy pulled into his spot, checked his reflection in the rearview mirror, and hurried to get his gear out of the trunk.

Liza stood leaning against her trunk as he came to get her. She was tinkering with her phone. She heard him approach and wiggled her phone at him. "Just building the order so I can hit send as soon as we get signal back."

"Sounds good."

"Any requests?"

"Something spicy."

“Oh really?” She quirked one eyebrow at him, no doubt crafting another ‘you’re from Missouri’ crack.

“Oh, were you asking about food?” He did his best to smolder at her.

She definitely was trying to hide a smile as she said, “You’re the worst.”

“I try.”

She reached out and relieved him of some of his gear as they headed for the elevator. She read him bits of the menu as they rode up, but Darcy couldn’t focus on much aside from the space between them. Every brush, every slight touch sent heat trailing along his skin. The inches between them seemed charged.

Liza, for her part, seemed totally at ease and Darcy couldn’t help admiring her calm confidence. She smiled and he’d smile back involuntarily – how could he not? Her blonde hair was pulled back into a complicated braid that hung down to her shoulder blades, little tendrils escaping around her ears and at the nape of her neck, making her look completely relaxed but effortlessly pulled-together and he envied her poise.

Her v-neck t-shirt showed off the hollow at her collarbone, an utterly kissable spot of creamy skin that he knew smelled so powerfully of *her* that he was sure it would become one of his favorite spots to kiss if she’d permit him to keep kissing her in the future.

They arrived at headquarters and he gestured for her to go ahead of him out of the elevator. They dropped his equipment on Brett’s worksurface.

“Wow, they really left in a hurry,” he said, looking at the uncharacteristic mess. Papers strewn about, headsets dropped on the table, coffee cups and a plate only half-full of cut-up fruit sat forgotten.

“Once we knew Lydia was in trouble, they probably left as soon as they knew which hospital to point for.”

“Right,” Darcy said, not sure how to convey that he had known that, and that he was mostly making small talk, without sounding like a condescending prick. He stayed silent instead, knowing that choice came with its own dangers. He never knew quite how to handle social situations like this; small talk wasn’t his forte and this night was already bizarrely, wonderfully unusual and giving him anxiety about how to navigate the conversation.

Liza cleared her throat. He looked at her, and she had her eyebrows raised expectantly. “You said you need to upload your footage?”

“Yeah,” he said, pulling the tiny camera from its storage space on the front of the body armor he’d already plunked down on the work surface. He plugged it in and started up the software that would catalog and cross-reference it with other video files in Brett’s system.

“Wow, this is fancy,” Liza said, leaning on the wide, stainless-steel table Brett used as a centralized workspace. Her eyes were flitting across the multiple monitors Brett used, drinking it all in.

“Do you guys not use this?” He clicked around, setting the upload to the right place and making sure everything was moving smoothly before turning back to face her.

“Not even a little bit. We can’t all be rich and fancy like you.” Her tone was teasing, but he sensed that there was something she wasn’t saying.

“We don’t have to be competitors, you know.”

She narrowed her eyes and cocked her head.

Darcy swallowed, sure that he was going to put his foot in his mouth, but also sure that if she accepted his offer, everyone would be happier for it.

“I’m hoping to retire,” he said.

Her eyebrows flew up and she pulled back. “That’s... ambitious.”

“It’s not,” he said dismissively. “Giana and I both inherited money when our grandfather died. We’re fine. But

Brett doesn't want to quit. I've stayed on mostly for him. He's the brains, but he needs the brawn for this business to work. I'd love to drop out of the picture entirely, but he'd need an experienced Hunter to take my place."

A long, charged moment passed before she spoke, her voice distressingly calm. "Are you offering me a job?"

"Not really," he said. "A job would mean that I'd be your boss and I'd pay your salary and I'm not interested in any of that. I'd like to sell you my business. Or, sign it over to you entirely, with no expectations of anything in return."

"You're just *giving* me your city contract and your headquarters and all this tech and Brett and -"

"Well, I can't *give* Brett away, he's a human person who gets to choose where he goes and what he does, but otherwise, yeah. I guess so. It's not really a gift, though, because you'd have to do a shit ton of really hard work to earn it. I'm more . . . giving Brett a gift."

"You're giving me to Brett as a gift?"

"No, no." He shook his head. God. How was he so bad at explaining himself? He looked at her and saw the smile playing around the edge of her mouth. "Oh." She was messing with him, getting him all tongue-tied on purpose.

"Why?" she asked, shaking her head and furrowing her brow.

"Because I was planning to retire at the end of this year anyway. I came to L.A. because Giana's here and I'd want to end up here when I was done. Brett needed my name, my experience to get established, and I was hoping he'd be snatched up by another company anyway. Then we got the contract and he was trying to convince me to stay, and I kept putting him off, but after seeing you work tonight, I think maybe... this could be perfect. You get to keep doing what you're great at, you get the influx of money you deserved from that contract that probably should have been yours to begin with, Brett gets a new Hunter to boss around,

and I get to stop wrestling with monsters every other night.  
Win, win, win.”

“Win.”

He frowned at her.

“Four wins,” she said.

He counted. “Three people winning.”

“Oh, now you’re questioning my abilities in math?”  
she poked at his midsection playfully. He caught her finger  
and pulled her toward him.

He kissed her, smiling. She smiled against his lips, too,  
until he felt her melt against him and the kiss turned  
serious. His arms were around her, holding her body against  
his, and he felt her hands wind their way up into his hair.

Suddenly she pulled away, saying, “Oh.”

Disoriented and trying to catch his breath, he watched  
her pull her phone from her pocket. It was lit up and  
buzzing. “Food’s here,” she said.

Darcy had never been so disappointed by a food  
delivery app in his life.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE – LIZA

Shortly after the food arrived – and Liza tried to stop Darcy from tipping the delivery driver in cash and he tried to block her from seeing that he had handed over a fifty-dollar bill – they settled onto a sofa upstairs in the one-bedroom condo that Darcy called home.

The walls were still bare and the furniture was all leather, steel, and glass. All in all, the effect was starkly masculine and unexpectedly sterile.

“I haven’t really settled in yet,” Darcy admitted when he caught her craning her neck around. “But I’m not great at making a house feel like a home anyway, so it doesn’t get a lot better than this.”

“It’s better than a lot of single guys – you’d be surprised how many dudes are willing to let a girl see a futon in their living room and all their electronics cords splayed out everywhere.”

“I do pride myself on at least buying grown-up furniture and putting all my stuff away.”

“It’s clean.”

“That’s a point of pride, too, if I’m being honest.”

“Fair enough.”

Liza dug out food, separating napkins and making sure everything was right and Darcy turned on a baking show. “For background noise,” he said when he saw her expression.

“No, I get that,” she said, taking her seat on the dark brown leather sofa. “I just didn’t take you for a baking show guy.”

“I just told you that my heart’s greatest desire is to live near my sister and *not* be a vampire Hunter anymore, and you’re surprised that I tend toward domesticity?”

“Um. Yeah. A little.”

“Well, then there are a lot of surprises in store for you in the future.”

Damn it. That line should not be as much of a turn-on as it was. Liza was going to need to find *something* about this guy that wasn't an absolute panty-dropping piece of information. She aimed for something innocuous – his name.

“So Darcy.”

“Yes?”

“No, I mean, the name. Darcy.”

His eyebrows went up as he took a bite of his burrito. Then they went further as he recognized how delicious it was.

“Isn't that usually...” she trailed off. She was already regretting this. She didn't want to pretend to mess with him.

He swallowed. “A girl's name?” he said drily. “Yeah.”

“So?”

“So, it's a family name. It means ‘darkness’, so it worked out for me, since I work in the dark, but firstborn sons are all Darcy in my family, going back a dozen generations.”

“So, you're like, Darcy DeLaurens, the... twelfth?” She couldn't hide her surprise.

“No,” he said, shaking his head and wiping at his mouth with a paper napkin. “DeLaurens is Italian, Darcy is Irish. The Darcy tradition goes back on my mother's side of the family – the side that Giana and I inherited from, incidentally – so I'm the first Darcy DeLaurens. But the tradition passed to me, since I was the first boy born in this generation of our family.”

“Oh.” Liza felt silly. A simple explanation for a nice tradition and she'd tried to mock it. Twice. But he didn't seem embarrassed, not even a little bit.

She was trying to figure out how to make up for being a jerk, when her phone buzzed again. It was well past two in the morning, so it could only be Jane.

It was a text: *Lydia's going to be fine. But her blood work is abnormal. They suspect that she was bit by a vampire already, but they can't tell what comes next. If she'll turn or not.*

"Shit," Liza hissed.

"Bad news?" Darcy asked, except he sounded genuinely concerned, where most guys at this point would be only pretending so they could take her pants off again.

"Yeah, I think so," she said. She showed him the screen, let him read it. She watched as his brows knitted together and his lips pressed tight.

"I'm so sorry," he said. After a beat, he asked, "How can they not know what comes next?"

Liza shrugged. "The science on blood and bite tracing is new. I'll have to ask Jane more in the morning."

"Why not now?"

"Because her job right now is to just be with Lydia. And I don't want her worrying about answering my curiosity or keeping me informed more than she feels comfortable. She'll do all her research, and she'll talk to the doctors, and she'll let me know what she knows when she's ready."

"That's fair," Darcy said, but Liza felt his eyes on her. He knew she was pretending at nonchalance, that she was avoiding the truth. Damn it. How could he read her so easily?

Her appetite had fizzled out, and she wrapped up the remains of her burrito, lying to herself that she'd finish it for lunch tomorrow. Darcy did the same and then turned to face her, pulling one leg up onto the sofa and leaning sideways against the back.

"I'm worried," she admitted. The baking show continued in the background, low enough that she couldn't really hear what they were doing, but still filling the otherwise hollow space with the hum of activity.

"I'd be surprised if you weren't," he said, his voice calm and even.



Liza let out a shuddering breath. Why was his calm so infectious? His steadiness made her feel like she could handle whatever was happening with Lydia.

"She just barely moved in," Liza said. She picked at an invisible spot on her pants, focusing on something that didn't exist so she didn't have to focus on the confusing, conflicting feelings inside of her. "I feel kind of responsible for her."

"She's an adult," he said reasonably.

"Barely."

"Would you have listened to a big-sister type when you were her age?"

"When I was her age, I was already running this company," Liza said, rolling her eyes.

"Okay. But would Lydia have listened to you, or to Jane, if you had told her specifically *not* to hook up with a douchebag personal trainer with ties to a vampire hive?"

"I didn't even know—"

"Exactly. You didn't know. You had no idea he was tied up with Bridget the new vampire queen, you didn't know this would happen, had no way of guessing. You couldn't have predicted this, and I'm willing to bet she wouldn't have listened to you anyway. All you can do is support her as she figures this out."

"You're annoyingly smart." She slid him a side-eye glance and wished she hadn't. Every time she looked at him she forgot all the reasons she had told herself for not getting involved with him. He was desperately sexy, but he was also actually *listening* to her. And not just saying what she wanted to hear, but actually *talking* to her.

"It's my worst trait," he said, acting as if he was admitting something deeply personal, and she couldn't stop herself from chuckling. "No, but seriously. If you want to call Jane, figure out what's happening, you should do that. I'm curious, but I want you to feel comfortable."

Liza flipped her phone around in her hands, fidgeting with it as she thought. Finally, she said, "No. Not tonight. I'll let Jane rest and then get all her answers and tell me everything she knows when she's ready."

He nodded but said, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm sure." She set her phone down and turned to face him fully on the sofa, tucking her feet up underneath her. "You've been really great, you know that?"

"Ah, yes. Well that is my *best* trait." He lifted his eyebrows in an I-told-you-so expression.

She smiled and said, "You know? I actually believe that."

And she leaned forward to kiss him. First it was light, casual, testing. They'd hooked up twice, but this? Kissing on a sofa with a baking show on softly in the background and takeout sitting on the coffee table? This would make it real. More than a hookup.

Liza held back, not wanting to push.

They kissed, softly and tenderly, his hand gently caressing her jawline, his fingertips feather-light on her skin.

Liza pulled away and opened her eyes. Darcy's head was still resting on the back of the sofa, his eyes closed, a blissful expression on his face. A small *hmmm* escaped him and Liza couldn't bite back her smile.

She leaned forward to kiss him again, this time more insistently.

Darcy responded in kind, his tongue sweeping across her lips. Heat pooled inside Liza, gathering between her legs. She wound her fingers in his hair and crushed her lips to his, kissing him with enough intensity to tell him that this was real. She was staying.

His hand dropped from her jaw to her shoulder and then her back, pulling her close. Liza mounted him, putting one leg on either side of his lap, never breaking the kiss. She felt him hardening against her as she pressed her body against his.

Darcy kissed her throat, her jaw, down to the spot above her collarbone. Liza dropped her head back, surrendering to him, grinding against him as his mouth blazed a trail of heat across her skin.

There were too many clothes between them. Liza wanted his skin against hers, his body against hers. She leaned back just a touch and tugged on his t-shirt. Darcy leaned up, holding her steady and helped her take off his shirt.

She let out a long breath and shook her head slightly, marveling again at his muscles. The man had worked hard for that body and she intended to let him know how much she appreciated that work. Recognizing the hunger in his eyes, Liza stripped off her own shirt, revealing the sports bra she'd worn on the Hunt. Unabashed, she stripped that off, too and sat there, in his lap, letting him look at her.

His cock pulsed beneath her as his eyes roved over her body – she'd worked hard for it, too – and she ground her hips against him.

He grabbed at her hips, holding her still. “Not yet,” he growled. “I want to take my time.”

Liza thought she might combust. Instead she leaned forward, putting her breasts closer to his face and braced herself on the back of the sofa, one hand on either side of his head.

Darcy kissed her breasts, his hands still on her hips, holding her in check. His eyes closed and Liza watched him as he worshipped her tits. His tongue flicked out gently at her nipple and Liza's breath went ragged. He started sucking on her now-hardened nipples, first one. And then the other.

She closed her eyes and threw her head back and let him work her tits. His hands massaged when his mouth moved on. He pinched her, lightly at first, then harder when she let out a whimper of desire.

Then one of his hands dropped to her pussy, rubbing at her through her leggings. She moaned and grinded against his hand.

Darcy pulled her face back down, kissing her urgently. "Bedroom?" he asked.

She moaned wordlessly against his mouth.

"The leather isn't my favorite," he said between kisses.

Liza nodded, then kissed him again. He grabbed her and pulled her closer, eliminating all space between them, then stood up. Liza clamped her legs around his waist and continued kissing him as he carried her to his bedroom.

Darcy laid her on the bed and kissed his way down her body. He stopped to pay special attention to both her breasts, licking and flicking each with his tongue before moving on. His mouth trailed down her abdomen, his tongue lighting her on fire as he went. He deftly swept off her leggings and panties and Liza spread her legs for him.

He was gentler this time, more deliberate. His tongue swept up one side first, then the other, making sure her pussy was warm and wet and ready.

Liza didn't watch. She laid back on the softest bedspread she'd ever felt and relaxed into it, letting Darcy do what he needed to do. The man could eat pussy like a god damned pro and she wasn't going to waste a second of it.

Darcy finally reached her clit, pressing against it with long, slow strokes of his tongue, soft. Warm. Relaxed. He licked up and down, slowly. Methodically.

Liza's hips responded, bucking lightly beneath that mouth of his. She felt one of his fingers enter her and she let out a moan.

Darcy's finger fucked her, slowly, as he kept licking her clit. Liza bucked against him, fucking his face and his hand, moaning all the while.

He pulled his finger out and increased the pressure on her clit, his tongue hardening against her, becoming more insistent. Liza felt his wet finger trail down and caress her asshole. She lifted her hips, signaling him to keep going.

As he sucked her clit, harder and harder, his finger entered her asshole, probing gently at first. Liza let out a breath, letting the muscles in her ass relax, welcoming him in. With his finger in her ass, his mouth on her clit, he slid his thumb inside her sopping wet pussy, filling her aching need.

Darcy fucked her pussy and her ass with his hand, sucking on her clit like it was his god damned job. Liza's hands twisted in the bedspread, grabbing handfuls of it as she fucked his face, pleasure cresting through her like a wave.

"I'm gonna cum," she breathed. He'd said he wanted to take his time and—

"Not yet," he growled again. Without his face between her legs, she dropped her hips back down to the bed. He pulled his fingers out of her and put his thumb in front of his mouth, licking it slowly, keeping eye contact with her, tasting her.

Liza sat up as he stood, and she removed his pants. He played with her right tit as she undid his belt and zipper, then pulled his pants and boxer shorts down, setting his cock free.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, his cock at attention in front of her face, Liza leaned forward to kiss the tip. With one hand, she held it steady in front of her, with her other, she grabbed at his ass.

Darcy stepped out of his pants, then stood in front of her.

Liza ran her tongue down the length of his shaft, tasting the salt and the sweat and the sex on him. She licked him from balls to tip, up and down, then swirled her

tongue around the head until his entire cock was glistening with her saliva.

He scooted closer, pressing his dick against her chest, between her tits. Liza grabbed at her breasts, smashing them together, surrounding his cock with tit-flesh as he pumped against her. She looked up at him, watched the hunger in his eyes turn into a need, the same aching need she felt, as he fucked her tits.

When she felt that heat building inside of her again, she pulled away and then stood to kiss him. She kissed him and stroked the length of him, pulling him down to the bed. He reached for the nightstand, pulling a condom out of the top drawer.

As he obliged, she turned her back to him and got on all fours, presenting her ass to him. "You pick," she said, her voice hoarse as he put on the condom.

"We're gonna take our time," he said, and to her surprise she felt the tip of his cock at the entrance to her pussy. He played with her entrance for a minute, getting his cock slippery and wet before pushing inside.

She moaned and dropped her head to the bedspread, her hands twisting in the fabric again. He waited inside her, pulsing gently as she squeezed him, welcomed him. After she picked her head back up, he began fucking her in earnest.

Long, slow strokes, his hands holding her hips. Liza reached back and grabbed one of his hands, pulling it up to play with her tits as he fucked her. She bucked her hips against him, matching his rhythm. His free hand went to her clit, rubbing in circles in time with his thrusts.

Liza was again close to cumming when he pulled out and guided her to flip over.

She lay flat on her back and he guided her legs up in the air, one on either side of his face as he plunged back into her again. He kissed her calf, his mouth just as fiery on her legs as it was anywhere else. He held her legs against

him, up in the air, as he fucked her harder and faster this time.

His thumb rubbed her clit still, his cock pumping furiously inside of her. She'd been brought to the brink twice already and she didn't know how much slower she could take it. She let her tits bounce as he fucked her, holding his gaze steady as she breathed hard and heavy.

Darcy's chest glistened with sweat and Liza watched his muscles flex as he thrust deep inside her. Her breathing was more like panting now, her moans growing in volume, her pussy clenching and squeezing as her orgasm built to a crescendo.

"You ready?" he asked, his voice breathless.

She nodded, unable to speak.

"Then cum for me," he said. His thrusts grew faster, harder, his thumb working her clit.

"Oh," was all she could say as she arched her back and let the orgasm take her. She cried out wordlessly again, and again, arching her back and bucking her hips against him. He stayed with her, thrusting and grinding until she was finished.

As her waves of pleasure subsided into quiet, pulsing shivers, Darcy grabbed at her hips and thrust into her deep, hard, and fast, pushing for his own climax. He pounded into her, holding her steady and her climax reversed direction, climbing towards orgasm once more.

She was nearly spent, but her body kept roiling with pleasure as Darcy drove into her again and again and again. Just as her second orgasm crested, her pussy clenching tight, she heard him release a growl, his thrusts becoming shorter, quicker.

They climaxed together, she for the third time that night, he for the second.

Liza collapsed onto the bed fully, breathing heavily, as Darcy crashed down beside her. He huffed out a laugh as he draped an arm over his eyes. His free hand found Liza's and

he idly played with her fingers as her heartrate slowed and her breathing returned to normal.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR – DARCY

Waking up next to Liza was the closest thing to home Darcy had felt in a very long time. Years, probably. They'd taken a quick shower together the night before, then fallen asleep in each other's arms. There had been no question about whether or not she would stay.

Blackout curtains kept the late-morning sun at bay (a necessity when one worked nights and well into the wee hours of the morning) and he rolled over to see her sleeping next to him, blissful peace plain on her beautiful face.

He drowsed, in no hurry to wake fully and break the spell of this perfect moment.

Liza rolled over, closer to him and he put an arm around her, lightly caressing her back with his fingertips. Her body pressed against his as she snuggled in closer, a hand coming to rest on his chest. She made a sweet sound, something between a sigh and hum, as she nestled close to his body.

After several peaceful minutes, Liza started to stir. She stretched, arching her back and pressing her breasts against him, her foot moving up and down his leg. His body responded and he rolled slightly to disguise his erection; he didn't want to pressure her into something she didn't want, especially not first thing in the morning.

Well. If 'noon' could be considered 'first thing in the morning'.

"Morning," she said, blinking her eyes adorably at him and smiling sleepily.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Morning. Coffee?"

"Mmmm... in a minute." She reached up and kissed him, reaching down for his cock at the same time.

Well. He wasn't going to argue with that. He kissed her back, slowly and gently, luxuriating in the intimacy and coziness of the moment.

When she was sure that he was at full attention, she rolled on top of him, giving him a sexy, sly smile.

"Condom?" she asked as she straddled him, still stroking his length slowly.

He reached for the nightstand but barely managed to get the top drawer open. Liza leaned over and pulled out a condom. Still stroking him, she tore it open with her teeth and discarded the packaging before rolling it onto his cock.

Then she lowered herself onto him, enveloping him with her velvety warmth. Most of the blankets had fallen away, but he kicked them off completely, reveling in the gorgeous sight above him.

Slowly, Liza rocked her hips, taking him deep inside, fucking him awake. He watched her body move as she let her head fall back, her eyes closed. Holding onto her hips as she rocked, he watched her breasts as she arched her back.

Her rocking quickened, her breaths coming faster and more ragged. She reached for one of his hands and lifted it to her breast, squeezing once before dropping away again. He took the hint and massaged her breasts, paying special attention to her nipples until she was moaning.

She leaned forward, bracing herself against the headboard, her tits falling in his face as she picked her hips up and came back down in a new, deeper angle.

Darcy took one of her tits in his mouth, sucking on her erect nipple, and put his hands back on her hips. Her motion was bringing him close to the brink once again.

He quickened the pace still further, letting her control the depth and the angle until she went still above him, her mouth open as she panted in wordless pleasure. He watched her face as she let the orgasm finish, pumping out his own climax along with her.

She let out that same half-sigh-half-hum sound and leaned down to kiss him. "I don't think I'm ever going to get tired of that."

He grinned at her. "Me neither."

She kissed him again and then got up, heading toward the bathroom out in the hall. He discarded his condom and cleaned up a bit before noticing that he had several texts from Brett. The most recent was from only a few minutes ago, giving him an update on Lydia. Darcy pulled on some fresh boxer briefs and started scrolling through the updates.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed when Liza returned a few minutes earlier.

"I borrowed a robe," she said, tying it shut around her. "I hope you don't mind. "

"Not at all," he said absently. She came and sat down behind him, leaning her chin on his shoulder.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Updates on Lydia."

She patted at her hips, as if searching pockets that obviously didn't exist in his bathrobe. Looking around the room, she frowned.

"I think you left your phone out on the table."

"Right." She left to get it and Darcy decided to finish dressing. When he was finished, he went to find her, to check on her.

Liza perched on the edge of his couch, hunched over her phone, gnawing on a fingernail or a hangnail. As he watched, she started texting to someone, so he decided to leave her to it. Brett had given him perfunctory information: Lydia had been bitten somewhere along the way, she was recovering from the drugs in her system, if she could avoid turning into a vampire (somehow), she would be just fine. Everything else about her was healthy, or would be soon enough.

Darcy bypassed the living room and headed for the kitchen with a plan to make coffee and maybe some

breakfast.

Twenty minutes later, he brought Liza a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and whole-wheat toast and a mug of black coffee before bringing his own breakfast in.

"I heard Lydia is going to be okay," he started.

Liza sighed heavily. "We think so, yeah." She dug into her food and groaned. "This is really good. Thank you."

"I enjoy cooking."

She smiled at her food. "Of course you do." Shaking her head slightly, she kept eating.

He hesitated. "Is... that a problem?"

"It's just that you're a little too good to be true."

Darcy didn't know what to say to that. So he sat, drinking his coffee, poking his breakfast.

"Did you mean what you said last night?" Her voice was quiet and she wasn't looking at him. She was poking her food, too.

Maybe they had a lot to talk about.

"I rarely say things I don't mean," he said, "So my instinct is to say 'yes' but you're going to have to be more specific."

"About the business?" She sounded scared.

"Yeah. I meant that. But only if you want it. I don't want to make things more complicated, or make you uncomfortable—"

"So you offer me *everything*?" She looked up at him finally, her eyes pleading with him.

There was no going back. He was all in, for better or for worse, and she was going to have to deal with his blatant honesty.

"Yeah. I do. I'm offering you the business. The contract. We'll hire attorneys and get it done legally and whatever you need—"

"But what if this," she gestured between them, "doesn't work. Then what? I work for my ex? My ex *owns* me?"

"Of course not. The business and the personal stay separate. I honestly think that's the only way to do this. I don't want to compete with you. I *can't* compete with you. I'd rather you boss Brett around and I get to work on beating you in a workout someday."

"Fat chance."

"I know. But, even though I don't see this, between us, ending, I'm not stupid enough to rule it out entirely and I'm not macho enough to pretend your feelings aren't valid. The business is separate, and you can have a lawyer help you make sure the sale or the transfer or whatever is completely bullet proof. Not contingent on my feelings or on your feelings, nothing. Set it in stone and I'm out. Once there's no professional friction between us, we can focus on building this. On us."

She looked back at her food, but he thought he saw her biting down on a smile.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE – LIZA

Liza was a little shocked by how simple it had been to take over Darcy's business. He hired her as a business manager and they worked side-by-side for a few weeks while Jane and Brett figured out the technical aspects of working together. Then he promoted her to CEO and officially resigned, leaving the lucrative city contract in her hands.

The more difficult task had been integrating Lydia into the operations. She knew her way around graphic design and had given their website a much-needed facelift, but she spent most days morose and unmotivated.

"Do you think she'll snap out of it?" Darcy asked as he drove them to the 11:00 AM CrossFit class.

"I really don't know," Liza said, shaking her head. It was a cloudy day, threatening rain, and she wore one of Darcy's black hoodies that he said he no longer wanted. *No more black clothes, now that I'm not a Hunter.* "How long does it take someone to get over the fear of *maybe* turning into a vampire?"

"That would make it easier – if she knew for sure one way or another."

"Maybe Jane will find answers."

"I know I've only known Jane for a month, but if anybody can find an answer, it's her."

Liza nodded. He was right.

They pulled into the parking lot of City of Angels CrossFit. Liza waved to her friend, Charlotte, who was walking into the box as Darcy pulled into a parking spot.

"Do you think Giana will ever forgive you for joining a CrossFit box?"

Darcy chuckled. "Do you think George will ever forgive me for shooting him in the butt with a crossbow?"

"Please," Liza laughed. "That's the most badass thing that has ever happened to that man. He'll be telling that story for the rest of his life."

She looked over at him, expecting to see him laughing with her, but he wasn't. He had a soft half-smile on his face and he was watching her with a far-away look in his eyes.

"What?" she asked self-consciously. She patted at her hair, which was braided back and out of the way for class.

"It's nothing."

"It's not nothing, you're looking at me weird."

"It's not weird. It's just..."

She watched him, a dozen different little micro-expressions playing across his face. "It's just... *what?* That makes me crazy when you do that."

"It's just that I could listen to you laugh all day. Forever."

She laughed again and got out of the car. When he was also out she called across to him, "Well, too bad. Because instead of watching me laugh," he came around the car, putting himself directly in her path, "you're going to watch me kick your butt at this workout."

He put an arm around her waist, pulling her close. "That's even better."

And he kissed her. Long and hard, with the promise of a future behind it.

Then Liza took his hand and led him into the gym, where she would absolutely be kicking his ass for the foreseeable future.

# CHAPTER ONE – JANE

Jane wasn't big on parties, but since her best friend/business partner was in a *mood* and her baby sister was ready to get black-out drunk, Jane had been named the designated driver to a Thanksgiving-weekend backyard mixer.

The townhouse had a shared greenspace in lieu of a backyard. Twinkle lights wrapped around a pergola and up the trunks of trees, each of which was surrounded by a waist-high retaining wall, perfect for sitting on.

She didn't consider herself a wallflower, but she brought her takeout coffee to one of the retaining walls and perched, waiting for either her sister, Lydia, to reappear and need her help or for her best friend, Liza, to appear and apologize for ruining the holiday. Either one would be fine, and Jane was perfectly comfortable with her own thoughts in the meantime.

"Hey," a male voice said. She looked up to see a handsome, familiar-ish face behind a pair of dark-rimmed glasses. "Is that place any good?"

She frowned and looked at the retaining wall she sat on.

"No, no," he chuckled, shaking his head. "Sorry, that wasn't clear. I meant the coffee place. I've driven past it a couple times, but I'm scared of bad coffee."

"Scared of bad coffee?" She raised an eyebrow questioningly. He was cute. Like. *Really* cute. Hair that straddled the line between blond and brown, clean-shaven with bright eyes and a wide, open smile full of perfect white teeth. She wished she could remember where she had seen him before.



“Well, yeah,” he said, jamming his hands in his pockets, looking adorably nervous. “I mean. A bad cup of coffee can kind of ruin the whole day, right? And then you don’t want to get a better one, because that’s too much caffeine all at once, so then you just gotta sit with the bad coffee in your system and feel bad about it all day.”

“You take your coffee very seriously.”

“As serious as anything, I guess. So? Is it good?”

She shook her head sadly. “No. I’m sorry. I really *love* bad coffee.”

He laughed again and adjusted his glasses. “I deserve that I guess.”

“It’s actually pretty good,” she said, adjusting her position so that he knew he could sit next to her if he wanted. He took the hint and sat beside her, turning his body toward her just a little. “It also happens to be about point-two miles from my apartment, so that makes it seem even better.”

“Yeah, that’ll do the trick. I’m Brett, by the way.”

“Jane.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. You know, I gotta say, you look *so* familiar to me. I can’t figure out where I know you from.”

“I hate to break it to you, but I’m willing to bet you’ve got me mixed up with someone else.”

“Oh, so there’s just no way I could recognize you from anywhere?”

“I doubt it,” he said lightly. “I just barely moved here a couple weeks ago. Haven’t had a chance to get out almost at all until tonight. Except for one thing last week, but that wasn’t exactly the type of place—”

“The mayor’s dinner!” Jane gasped.

“Yeah...” Brett cocked his head to the side, considering her. “That’s right. I was at the mayor’s dinner last week. That’s weird, how did you—oh, you must have been there, too. Sorry, I don’t remember seeing you.”

Heat flushed up Jane's cheeks as it all came flooding back to her. She took a sip of coffee to buy some time. He and his colleague, Darcy, had been at the mayor's dinner the previous weekend. The mayor was announcing new grants for public safety, and Jane had been hoping to secure one for her company. Darcy's company – Brett's company, too, if he had been at that same dinner – had won the contract. Jane likely wouldn't have paid the two men much attention, except for the fact that they were extraordinarily handsome men and she and Liza had ogled and fantasized a little too much to be considered professional.

Right up until they had learned who won the contract. That was why Jane remembered Brett, but Brett didn't remember Jane: she and Liza had sprinted out of the room when the contract had been announced.

"I saw you just before the dinner started," she managed to get out. She licked her lips and avoided looking at him. She couldn't tell him that the reason he had looked so familiar was because she had spent the entire meal imagining him naked, even though they hadn't met yet.

"I would have liked to meet you, see you *after* the dinner was over." His tone was gentle, but Jane could tell that he sensed she was being weird about something.

She took a deep breath and decided a white lie was probably for the best. "My friend wanted to leave, and I was her ride."

"Ah, that makes sense." He nodded and let it go. They sat in silence for a moment, the sounds of the party washing over them. Loud music thumped from somewhere far across the greenbelt, a hundred conversations jumbled together to create one monotonous cacophony, punctuated occasionally by loud laughter or a shriek.

"I never understand why people scream at parties," Brett said, his voice sounding mystified.

Jane huffed out a laugh, glad that he changed the subject. "Yeah, what could possibly happen that catches you

so off-guard that you shriek like that?"

"Oh no, suddenly there's still beer everywhere!" Brett pretended to be scared, comically overacting.

Jane laughed heartily. Then she threw her hands up and pretending to scream, too. "Ah! Music is still playing!"

"My friend is standing right by me!"

"Strangers are standing right by me!"

"Oh don't joke about stranger-danger," he said, feigning sudden seriousness. "That's how they get you."

She laughed again. "Who's 'they'?"

"The strangers. The ... ah ... the dangerous ones." He gestured out to the main party, pointing vaguely at nothing and everything all at once.

Jane marveled at the feeling in her chest, the lightness expanding there. She had been so stressed about trying to win that city contract, and then so angry when she had obviously and publicly failed. And then Lydia—

"Hey, uh, are you alright?" Brett asked, his voice showing genuine concern.

Something must have shown on her face, but Jane tried to put on a bright smile. "No, everything is fine, I'm sorry, I'm just going through some stuff right now."

"Got it." He lapsed into silence but didn't turn away or move to leave. "If you... uh... want to talk about it? I'm enjoying talking to you, and I'd rather not leave just yet, unless you want me to—"

"No, please, don't go." She hesitated, and decided to focus on something true, but not all of the truth. "My younger sister just moved in with me. I worry about her in normal times, and now that I feel sort of responsible for her, I've been worrying more than usual."

"Oh, yeah. I can understand that." His shoulders relaxed, as if he was relieved that she wasn't pushing him away. "Is she a lot younger than you?"

"Five years. She's twenty-seven, and a perpetual college student."

“Like, a researcher?” His eyebrows went up in polite interest.

“More like Peter Pan. Never wants to grow up.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah. But our dad and stepmom just cut her off, so she’s moving in with me until she get her feet under her.”

“That’s generous of you to take her in.”

Jane fidgeted with her coffee lid, noticing that her manicure was slightly grown out; she’d need to make an appointment in the next couple days. “She’s my sister, what else would I do?”

“A lot of people would tell their twenty-seven-year-old sister to hit the road. Get a job, grow up. You’re being generous and supportive. It’s admirable.”

Jane cringed. “I gave her a job, too.”

“Oh wow. You own a business? Or manage something?”

“I... ah...” She winced. “I run SoCal Vampire Hunting, Inc.”

She watched him as comprehension dawned. “Ah. So now you’re fraternizing with the enemy.” He sounded sad, and Jane’s heart clenched.

“Kind of?” she replied. “But, I’m not sorry. I’m having a good time.”

He smiled, bright and wide. “Me too. And maybe we don’t need to be enemies. Maybe we can be partners.”

Jane found herself smiling, too, as the party kept raging around them, leaving them in their quiet bubble on the sidelines.

Read the rest of Jane's story in

JANE'S HUNT, releasing June 8th, 2021.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08ZNR59XF>

## About The Author

### **Afton Leigh Rose**

Afton began writing fiction at age eleven, starting with fan fiction of 90210 (the 90s version... yikes). Luckily, since then, her tastes have widened, though fan fiction and retellings will always be close to her heart.

She began writing as a serious hobby in 2011, and after trying out contemporary romance, fantasy, and science fiction, she came back around to the most logical genre of all: Vampires.

Afton lives in the Phoenix area with her family.

## Books In This Series

### *Vampire Hunters*

#### **Jane's Hunt**

Jane's the best Tracker in Los Angeles, until Brett Charles shows up. Then Jane's company is acquired by Brett's, and she's forced to work side-by-side with him. She could handle the professional rivalry, but the sexual tension between them is a whole other problem.

When their romantic relationship starts to encroach on their professional one, Jane decides to find a new job, but only after helping Brett train up her younger sister, Lydia to take her place.

Jane watches as Brett and Lydia grow closer professionally, and she can't help but wonder if there's more going on. Jane will have to decide which is most important to her: her relationship with her sister, the job she loves, or the sexy guy she's falling for.